

COBALT-SERIES

マリア様がみてる

今野緒雪

卒業前小景

集英社

Maria-sama ga Miteru

Volume 32

Written by:

Oyuki Konno

Illustrated by:

Reine Hibiki

Translated by:

Baka-Tsuki

Prologue

“Gokigenyou.”

“Gokigenyou.”

The clear morning greeting travels through the serene, blue sky.

Today, once again, the maidens that gather in the Virgin Mary’s garden smile purely to one another as they pass under the tall gateway.

Wrapping their innocent bodies and souls is a deep-colored school uniform.

Walking slowly so as to not disturb the pleats in their skirts, so as to not toss their white sailor scarves into disarray... such is the standard of modesty here. Running here because one is in danger of missing class, for instance, is too undignified a sight for students to wish upon themselves.

Lillian Private Academy for Women.

Founded in Meiji 34, this academy was originally intended for the young women of nobility, and is now a Catholic academy of prestigious tradition. Placed in downtown Tokyo, where you can still see traces of Musashi Field’s greenery, it is protected by God, a garden where maidens can receive tutelage from pre-school to university.

Time passes, and even now, in Heisei, three era-names past Meiji, it is a valuable academy, where nurtured ladies raised in greenhouses are shipped out in carefully packaged boxes after 18 years of schooling - an arrangement that continues to survive.

In any life there are all kinds of dramas.

From the large to the small.

Both dramatic soap-operas and serious comedies.

But no matter what the type, for the people involved they all contain glittering memories that money cannot buy.

It's the lead-up to graduation.

During this period, even at Lillian's,

All kinds of scenes abound.

Laughing While Reminiscing

Part 1.

“Quit it.”

Rei took her lips off the straw that was stuck into her milk box and said:

“You’re laughing because you’re reminiscing about something.”

“Reminiscing?”

Sachiko was considering what it could have been, but now that it had been mentioned the memory had vanished. She raised her gaze that had been lowered a little while ago, but that sensation still remained.

“Sorry, that was rude of me.”

They were sitting opposite each other, and by themselves, having lunch when she had suddenly started giggling in the middle of their conversation. It was probably a bit awkward.

“I don’t mind.”

Rei tore a hole in the plastic bag to free the bread roll, then cut it in two and offered one of the halves to Sachiko.

“If you don’t mind, I’d like it if you shared your amusing memory with me.”

It was almost approaching 1pm in Milk Hall. Usually, there would be hardly any spare seats but today was the day before the high school graduation ceremony and afternoon classes had been canceled. Presently only about one in four seats were occupied. The reason it was still open seemed to be to accommodate those students who were saying goodbye, as well as to satisfy the hunger of the teachers who were preparing for the ceremony tomorrow. There were also some students who came to buy food

and drinks, but didn't stay to eat. A while ago, some students from the arts club had bought a sizable number of pastries.

Perhaps out of respect the other students maintained a distance, creating this unusual image of the pair of Roses, Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida, sitting alone in the normally busy Milk Hall.

Even so, from the distance Sachiko could hear murmurs such as 'I wonder what they're doing here?' If they had just come up and asked instead of whispering to each other, she would have answered them. They had some minor matters to attend to in the afternoon, and having lunch in Milk Hall seemed like a good way to end.

"What's this?"

Sachiko asked, taking the offered bread.

"It's a bread roll with yakisoba noodles. You've never heard of it?"

"Of course I have."

She knew that such a thing existed in the world. What's more, she knew that they were sold on campus, having witnessed one of her classmates order one. And although she didn't go there often, she had seen them on sale at a convenience store. She couldn't remember, but she thought she might have even tried one at some point. It was major player in the bread-roll world.

But it was just carbohydrates on top of carbohydrates. Earlier they had eaten spicy potato-salad wrapped in a bun.

"..."

Not being accustomed to buying lunch, Sachiko had left it up to Rei to choose, but she was starting to wonder if this really was a normal combination. While she had taken her turn as the person on duty collecting the lunches, she had hardly ever ordered anything herself.

"It wasn't anything major."

Rei was still fixed in her listening pose, so Sachiko responded after taking a bite of the yakisoba bread roll.

“I was just wondering if they had a search through the Rose Mansion for any items that we may have forgotten. That kind of thing.”

The yakisoba bread roll was surprisingly good. The taste was somewhat reminiscent of traditional New Year’s foods.

“Ahh, on that. Yoshino said they were doing that today. Searching the rooms on the first floor of the Rose Mansion.”

“Oh, is that so. Then we’ll definitely have to go there after we’re done.”

Rei’s petit soeur, Yoshino-chan, is also her cousin and next-door neighbor, so they would talk on the way to and from school. Because of that, Rei was always well-informed.

“Is looking for lost items really that interesting? I’d guess that there aren’t any items that you’ve forgotten anyway, Sachiko.”

“True.”

The previous year’s Roses had been inattentive, and would go out leaving their personal effects scattered around. After having to deal with this, Sachiko and Rei were more cautious in their daily lives. Even so, Sachiko had been slightly worried about it, so yesterday morning she had secretly checked whether or not she had left anything behind. Consequently she was confident in her perfection.

“It amuses me to think about what Yumi’s face will look like when she realizes that I haven’t left anything behind.”

“Ahh, is that it.”

“Yeah.”

Sachiko finished the last of the tea in her carton.

“Well there’s still plenty to enjoy yet.”

Rei smiled coyly. That was the look she got when thinking about the future.

“You’re right. Well, should we get going?”

As soon as they stood up to move off, everyone’s gaze turned towards them.

Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida.

After tomorrow, they would no longer be called that.

The pair stopped momentarily at the vending machine in front of Milk Hall.

“Which should I get?”

“I just had tea, so something else would be good.”

“I’m fine with something else milk-based. Milk coffee it is.”

Just like with the bread rolls, they each put in exactly half the amount in coins and bought three milk coffees.

“I wonder where they are?”

Stepping outside she looked up at the branches of the cherry tree. While the flower buds were starting to expand, it looked like it would still be a number of days until they blossomed.

“If we go by her usual behavior...”

Rei was talking to herself as she pulled out her notebook.

“...she’d probably still be in the third year classroom.”

Part 2.

On the way to their destination classroom they were surrounded by several of their juniors.

Since this happened outside the third year Chrysanthemum classroom, Sachiko assumed they were waiting because they had some business with Rei. One, two, three, Only her eyes moved as she counted them. Seven people all up. A mixture of both first and second year students.

“Umm, Rosa Foetida. Could you please sign our autograph books?”

One of the students asked, acting as a representative for the group.

“You don’t mind?”

Before responding to the students, Rei sought confirmation from Sachiko. Because they were traveling together, Rei was probably concerned about making her wait.

“Go ahead.”

Having said that, Sachiko slipped out of the huddle of students.

Standing before her now, this was Hasekura Rei.

Sachiko only knew a small part of Rei’s school life, since she was in a different class and not involved with Rei’s kendo club.

Having been set free from the tyranny of exams, Rei would probably happily sign whatever she was asked. A rumor had gone around that Rosa Foetida wouldn’t refuse to sign autograph books and she would probably still be getting requests tomorrow, even though it was the day of the graduation ceremony.

Sachiko smiled wryly.

It had probably been towards the end of February when, during one of her free periods, a student had held out a notebook, that was bound like a paperback, towards her and asked if she would sign it. She had been incredibly busy at the time, although she couldn’t remember with what, and

had flatly refused without putting any thought into the decision. This happened in public and some people apparently took it to mean that Rosa Chinensis wasn't going to sign anyone's autograph book. The precedent of the Valentine's Day chocolates may have had something to do with it, but from that point on no-one had asked her to sign their book. It wasn't that she was feeling jealous as she watched Rei, but she did regret it somewhat.

Mainly for that student. She should have signed because that girl had been the only one to work up the courage to ask her. Even if she was in a hurry, she could have taken the notebook and returned it afterwards. If that wasn't possible, she could have at least asked for the girl's name and class. – But, unfortunately, she couldn't even recall the girl's face.

“Rosa Chinensis”

Someone suddenly called out to her as she was watching Rei standing in the side of the hallway, still signing away.

“Are you busy right now?”

It was an unknown junior. No, Sachiko had the feeling that she had seen this girl somewhere before, but couldn't remember her name.

“Not at all, as you can see.”

She had time to spare while she waited for her popular friend.

“Would you like to sign my autograph book?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Sachiko had been leaning against the wall but stood up straight when the book and felt-tipped pen were offered to her.

“I wonder what I should write.”

She asked as she accepted the items, and got the response of ‘Your name.’

“It's okay if I just write my name?”

“Yeah”

Rei seemed to be writing something more than just her name. She was probably changing it for each person, or taking requests. When she had heard the phrase ‘Heart, physique, technique,’ she had unintentionally blurted out ‘Sumo wrestling?’

And as for Sachiko.

It was a bit shaky because she had stayed standing as she signed, but she wrote her name wholeheartedly. – Ogasawara Sachiko.

“Thank-you very much.”

“You too.”

“Huh?”

“I’m glad you came back.”

“You actually remembered?”

“Truthfully, I wasn’t sure when I first saw your face.”

Sachiko brushed her fingers against the autograph book she had just returned. Her conviction came because she had recognized it. Conversely, if she had just seen the book it probably wouldn’t have been enough either. The face and the autograph book were a pair, and because of them she had recognized the girl she had initially refused.

“I’m sorry I turned you down back then.”

“It’s okay. You said what you did because you were in a hurry. So I thought I’d wait for an opportunity when you weren’t busy.”

“Really?”

“Yes.”

Really. Sachiko had hastily rejected her, but it seemed as though her feelings had been properly conveyed. Sachiko smiled.

That's nice.

At least in the eyes of the girl in question she wasn't seen as a complicated and hard to get along with senior.

"Umm, could you do the same for us?"

The students who had received Rei's autograph had timidly made their way over. They seemed to have noticed that Rosa Chinensis, who was rumored not to sign anyone's book, was pleasantly chatting with a student holding an autograph book.

Sachiko let out an exasperated sigh then relented.

"But I'm only going to write my name."

She couldn't match Rei's level of service, but Sachiko thought she should probably follow her example.

Onee-sama's Racket

Part 1.

The wooden spoon that comes with the ice-cream has a shape like a tennis racket.

So too the magnifying glass that her grandmother uses to read the newspaper, the ladle used for serving rice and the small hand-mirror she carries in a pouch. She hadn't been conscious of it until just now, but they all had the same basic shape as a racket.

The screen door was like the strings of the racket. So too was the lattice over her neighbor's ventilation ducts. Now she had moved on to noticing racket strings.

(Is this some kind of illness?)

Flopping down over her desk, Katsura sighed softly.

Some time ago she had been cleaning this very classroom. At that time, despite the vast differences in shape and materials, she had thought that the plastic dustpan resembled a tennis racket. And now this problem seemed terminal.

“What’s wrong, Katsura-san?”

She raised her head to see who had called out to her and Toudou Shimako-san was standing in front of the lockers at the rear of the classroom, looking her way.

“What do you mean?”

“Are you feeling unwell?”

Shimako-san had a slightly anxious expression. She was still a beautiful person no matter what expression she had on her face, but Katsura still felt

sorry for causing her to worry.

“Ahh, no, I’m fine.”

Hastily shaking her head, she smiled to show she was well. Her illness may have been terminal, but it was a problem with her mind not her body. So even if she was taken to the sick bay, she didn’t think they would cure her.

“Shimako-san, have you been there all along?”

Because there was practice for tomorrow’s graduation ceremony and other such things, afternoon classes were called off. Now, after lunch, they were the only two that remained in the classroom – and until just recently Katsura had thought that she was the only one. The third years may have been having private farewell parties in their classrooms but the first and second years were expected to go home immediately or, if they had a reason to stay, to move directly to their destination.

“All along? Umm, no? I had just come from the staff room and stopped in here to pick up some of my things.”

Shimako-san opened her locker and took out her coat.

“Are you going to the Rose Mansion?”

“Yeah. There’s some odd-jobs to be done.”

She’d just been at the staff room and was now going to the Rose Mansion. As you would expect, Rosa Gigantea was busy.

“As for me,”

She hadn’t been asked, but Katsura opened her mouth.

“I’d arranged to go home together with my onee-sama. But it seems like her class is doing something, so I’m waiting until they’re done.”

She hadn’t been challenged by Shimako-san, but it sort of felt that way. She wanted to explain that she had a reason for staying back, and wasn’t just

aimlessly loitering.

But Shimako-san hadn't really been interested in finding out if her classmate had a reason for being in the classroom, and had simply wanted to get something from her locker.

"Oh, really. That's good."

Shimako-san probably thought that going home together with your onee-sama would be 'good.' But for Katsura, she couldn't think about it as something 'good.'

"Well, I think I'll head over to the third year classrooms and see if I can find my onee-sama."

Katsura stood up, and left the room together with Shimako-san. In the hallway they bid each other farewell with 'Gokigenyou' and went left and right, respectively.

Katsura was thinking as she walked along.

She wondered what she would do when she got there. If she arrived while her onee-sama still had things to do, she would have to wait there. Or her onee-sama would have to hurry-up to accommodate her. That would be no good. She didn't want to cause a fuss now that it was right at the very end.

(But will she really be in her classroom?)

Suddenly, she stopped walking.

A very dangerous thought had just entered into her head.

(What am I thinking?)

If her onee-sama wasn't in the classroom, just where could she be, and what could she be doing?

(And who with?)

Stop it, stop it. If she kept thinking about that, her racket illness would worsen.

But would she be able to spontaneously recover from this illness if she went about her life as though she saw nothing, heard nothing and thought nothing?

Part 2.

Just how long had she been unable to stop thinking about tennis rackets.

It all went back to about a week ago. Probably no more than ten days.

After school, they were practicing their swings at the tennis courts that seemed lonely now that the third years were no longer there. Katsura was watching over her petit soeur, Mizue.

For some reason, Mizue seemed different then usual.

Something seemed out of place, as though she was wearing different clothes, or had a new haircut. But her hair was the same as usual, and Katsura was accustomed to seeing her in the clothes she had on.

It wasn't what she had on, but Katsura soon realized what it was. She was using a different racket. Which changed her form when she swung.

Katsura was going to ask her where she got the racket. Was it a newly purchased one? Was she borrowing it from someone? If she had asked about it quickly, it probably would have been a non-event. Mizue would have answered, telling her where it was from.

But Katsura hesitated momentarily. Looking closely at Mizue's racket, she saw that it wasn't a new one. And in the clubroom they had a number of spare rackets, but it wasn't one of those either. But it was definitely one that she had seen somewhere before.

That's it. It was Katsura's onee-sama's racket.

Why did Mizue have it?

Had her onee-sama given it to Mizue? That was probably it.

If a senior said they wanted to give you their racket, anybody, even Mizue, would gladly accept. So that was fine. Then where was the problem?

(... I get it)

Why did onee-sama choose Mizue to give her racket to? That was the question.

She fretted over it, but couldn't do anything about it. She couldn't decide whether or not to ask her onee-sama about it.

(Right. It's not like I'm in any position to judge her ...!)

Katsura startled herself.

Maybe this was just her reaping what she had sown.

About this time last year, Katsura had received a racket from the then vice-president of the tennis club, and she too had kept this a secret from her onee-sama.

At that time, she had been overjoyed to have elicited such an action from a beloved senior. For the students in the tennis club, it was like receiving a memento from someone you admired. Thinking that her onee-sama would have been offended by her receiving the racket, Katsura had adorned a wall of her room with it and the commemorative photo that Takeshima Tsutako had taken of them.

(It wasn't an affair. It's just that I admired her like an idol.)

But in that case, why hadn't she told her onee-sama about it. And why had she kept the racket hidden?

Right. Because she was feeling guilty about it. So she hadn't wanted her onee-sama to find out.

Understanding that, she couldn't ask her onee-sama about her feelings.

It was only when Katsura was placed in the opposite position that she realized just how unthinkable an act she had done.

Part 3.

(I give up)

Resting her hand against a hallway window, Katsura sighed softly.

Too much blood had rushed to her head, and now her legs wouldn't move as she commanded. She had rested for a little while, watching the world outside. She didn't know where she should go. Maybe she should just stay here.

However,

“Huh – Katsura-san?”

As she was thinking about giving up, someone called out to her. – Turning around, she saw her classmate from first-year, Fukuzawa Yumi-san, standing there.

“It really is you, Katsura-san. What's the matter?”

“The matter?”

“You were looking like you might be unwell.”

Yumi-san peered at her, looking concerned.

“Ah, no, my body's fine.”

Katsura hastily shook her head. It was like deja-vu. She saw the humor in that and smiled, which lured Yumi-san into smiling too.

Yumi-san's smiling face was nice. Basking in it, Katsura felt like a weight had been lifted off her shoulders.

"Yumi-san, you're going to the Rose Mansion from here, aren't you? You have some odd-jobs to do, right?"

As Rosa Chinensis en bouton, Yumi-san was friends with Shimako-san. So they would probably be doing the same thing. From Yumi-san's reaction, she knew she got it dead on.

"How did you know?"

"I have ESP"

Katsura said, as she held her right hand over Yumi-san's head.

"Ooh, you'll have to use that power to help me one of these days – "

"You know I'd really like to do that, but there are times when I can, and times when I can't use my powers."

Even as she was making such flippant remarks, Katsura was thinking that if she really did have this kind of power she would head straight to where her onee-sama was and use it on her.

"And you Katsura-san? Where were you off to?"

"Ahh, I was going to my onee-sama's classroom."

Katsura had stopped here while she was trying to decide whether or not she should go, but her original objective unintentionally slipped out of her mouth. But she thought this was fine, as Yumi-san would be heading to the Rose Mansion and this was what she had told Shimako-san earlier.

" – Hey, Yumi-san. Isn't the Rose Mansion in the other direction?"

Katsura had expected they would head off in opposite directions, but Yumi-san walked off together with her.

“Ahh, yeah, I guess that’s true.”

Yumi-san muttered, awkwardly.

“I thought I’d go and see my onee-sama too.”

“Huh?”

So it looks like Yumi-san would be escorting her to the third-year’s classrooms.

“Rosa Chinensis isn’t going to the Rose Mansion?”

“No, probably not today. But she may have gone home already.”

Oh, right, they were doing odd-jobs, weren’t they. The boutons of the retiring Roses wouldn’t want to make their onee-samas do that kind of work.

Katsura resigned herself to the situation. Perhaps this was the will of Maria-sama. At any rate, she would walk with Yumi-san to her onee-sama’s classroom. What happened after that, would depend on what she thought when she arrived there.

(But)

Would her onee-sama be in the classroom? As they approached the third-year classrooms, her heart started beating faster. Katsura looked down at her shoes as she walked along. At least she could say she was making forward progress.

“Sorry, Katsura-san.”

Yumi-san whispered, as she stopped walking.

“I’ll have to leave you here.”

“Huh?”

Katsura had taken a few paces ahead of Yumi-san before she noticed, then stopped and turned around. Then she turned around once more, to see what it was that Yumi-san was looking at.

“Ahh.”

She was a fair distance away, but it was definitely Yumi-san’s onee-sama, Rosa Chinensis, ahead of them in the hallway. It looked like she was being mobbed by a group of first years, and some second years too, who were trying to get her autograph.

Neither Rosa Chinensis nor the girls surrounding her seemed to have noticed Yumi-san, who quickly departed. So Katsura chased after her.

“Yumi-san.”

Yumi-san had finally stopped walking when she reached the stairway, probably deciding that she was completely hidden there.

“Huh? Why did you come back here, Katsura-san?”

Katsura’s strength drained from her body when Yumi-san asked her this question with a blank look on her face.

Why did I come back here, you ask? Well, why. Probably because I was worried about you, Yumi-san, and chased after you.

“Well, let me turn that question back on you. Yumi-san, why did you come back here?”

“Hmm, well, I guess I thought that it would be better if I wasn’t there, you know?”

“Better if you weren’t there?”

“How can I explain it. It’s not that I couldn’t stand what was happening. But for the people that were asking Rosa Chinensis to sign their books, it probably wouldn’t be good if her petit soeur suddenly appeared. I’m not bothered by them asking for her autograph, but they might hold back on

account of me being there. So it would be rude to those that had worked up the courage to go and ask her.”

“... Is that so?”

Katsura was still trying to understand why Yumi-san had to worry about being rude as she mumbled this.

“It’s not as though I had arranged to meet with onee-sama. If I had waited another ten minutes, I probably wouldn’t have seen this. So it’s okay. That I don’t show up there.”

“You’re not worried about it?”

When she asked, Yumi-san answered ‘Nope’ straight away.

“Why not? Other students are making a fuss over your onee-sama. By not refusing them, doesn’t that mean she’s not completely satisfied just with you? Is that fine? Don’t you want to know what your onee-sama is doing when you’re not watching?”

If Yumi-san had left that place because of jealousy, Katsura would have understood. It was what she wanted to have heard. But she was wrong. Her friend didn’t seem to be pretending to endure it at all.

Is that normal? Then was she strange for being jealous over a single tennis racket? Katsura had no idea.

“Katsura-san, what happened?”

Yumi-san’s perplexed face was not that of Rosa Chinensis en bouton, but the Yumi-san she knew so well, and Katsura cried out and embraced her.

Katsura was worn-out from standing alone.

“There was a time when I was jealous of other girls getting close to my onee-sama.”

Yumi-san spoke as though she was reading a weather forecast. Katsura hadn't said anything specific, but it seemed as though Yumi-san had sensed what was troubling her. Having climbed up the stairs and then exiting the building onto the emergency staircase, they could now feel the wind blowing against them.

"But now I don't worry about that."

"Why not?"

"Because I have faith in my onee-sama."

Then, after thinking for a while, Yumi-san added the following:

"I think things started to get better after I decided to approach her directly about things that would upset me."

Katsura felt a bit better, knowing that Yumi-san was worried about these things in the beginning. Time and all kinds of experiences didn't just result in a broken heart.

"I haven't talked to her about it."

So what should someone who has no time, nor experience do?

"What do you think will happen if you ask? If you're convinced it will open a terrible door, then you're going to feel far worse if you avoid it."

Even if it didn't seem as though she would end up in a position like Yumi-san's, it was the hint she had wanted.

"But, you know Katsura-san. If you really want to ask her, you can't run away or just bludgeon her with your feelings."

"...Yeah."

And there you have it, a completely banal solution to her problem. But coming from Yumi-san, it had a certain persuasiveness.

“Ahh, but I think seeing your onee-sama off quietly, without causing an uproar, is another way you could go.”

Yumi-san’s words. Tomorrow was the graduation ceremony, after all.

“But if it was you, you’d go and see her, right?”

“Probably. It was never usually as big a deal as I was imaging it to be.”

I get it, the anxiety you feel from doing nothing is worse than any danger you might face, right? It was true for people a long time ago and it still seems to apply.

“Thanks for the advice.”

“No, no, I’m just giving you something you can use as a reference.”

“Yeah. I’ll think about it.”

Eventually, Yumi-san had to leave to go to the Rose Mansion. Katsura waved goodbye as Yumi-san descended the emergency staircase.

With the sound of Yumi-san’s footsteps echoing in her ears, Katsura asked the question she had been wanting to ask for a while.

“Hey, earlier when you talked about ‘other girls getting close to your onee-sama,’ did you mean Touko-chan?”

“Bingo”

Yumi-san’s voice came floating back to her through the gaps between the stairs.

“I see.”

Katsura nodded to herself, then went into the school building and locked the door to the emergency staircase from the inside.

Rivals were probably always the biggest concern for petit soeurs.

Part 4.

So, for now, Katsura returned to the classrooms and quietly waited for her onee-sama. Before long she came out to greet her, and they left together.

It usually wasn't as big a deal as I imagined it was. Using those words as support, Katsura gathered her courage and asked. It was at the fork in the path in front of the statue of Maria-sama, because she had a feeling that Maria-sama had an interest in this too.

“About the racket I gave to Mizue-chan?”

Her onee-sama stood still, with a slightly conflicted look on her face.

“Yeah. I want to know what your feelings were at that time.”

“My feelings...”

“Yes.”

It looked as though she had never imagined that Katsura would ask her so directly. So her onee-sama was now searching for what to say. Not so that she could evade the question, but so that she could properly express herself. Eventually, she came up with a sentence.

“Let's see. I thought that it would be a good thing, for you. I guess.”

“A good thing for me?”

Katsura was bewildered as to why she had come up in the conversation. But she had asked her onee-sama for her feelings, and if that was it then it would be wrong of her to interrupt, so she should be silent and listen attentively.

“I thought that if you saw Mizue-chan innocently swinging away with my racket, that you might use that racket you have that you don’t use.”

“What do you mean, the racket that I don’t use?”

Her heart was hammering in her chest. No way, there’s no way she could have known.

“Last year – ”

“How do you know about the racket that Haru-sempai gave me?”

Ahh, she’d just ruined everything. She hadn’t been able to endure it and just blurted that out. And she’d been playing dumb too. What a catastrophe.

In her heart, Katsura whispered.

Yumi-san.

You said it usually wasn’t as big a deal as you imagined it, but you left out what happens when it doesn’t go as usual. Adding that in, you’d say there’s a possibility it would be a complete disaster, like now.

Onee-sama knew. And knowing everything, she gave her racket to Mizue-chan.

This must have been retribution for a selfish petit soeur.

But why had she done it now, when graduation was right before her.

Or maybe it was because she was about to graduate that she had done it.

“That’s because.”

Her onee-sama hesitated.

“Please tell me.”

Katsura was desperate.

“I want to know the truth.”

How long had her onee-sama known about it? Who had told her? What did she feel back then? What does she think about it now? She wanted to know everything.

For their relationship to break down on the day before her onee-sama graduated was deplorable, but she was just paying for her mistakes. It was nobody’s fault but her own.

Katsura had no excuse for her actions regarding Haru-sempai’s racket. If she was asked to return her rosary, she would just silently obey.

Thinking back on it, she hadn’t even known the names of all the seniors in the tennis club when she was asked to become a petit soeur. She had said okay to the first person that had asked her. Even so, she had been nervous, and loved her onee-sama.

“You asked me why I knew. That’s because...”

“That’s because?”

Katsura pressed her. As though she was blind to her own shortcomings. She knew those well enough.

“Because I asked her to.”

Was her onee-sama’s response.

“Huh?”

“I knew you looked up to Haru-sempai. So I asked her. Haru-sempai didn’t have a petit soeur, so she cheerfully agreed. Sure, she said. Because she liked you too.”

On one hand, she thought that was foolish. But on the other, she could kind of understand it. Either way, she didn’t think her onee-sama was lying to her.

“A year ago, I thought you’d be delighted by it. So I didn’t make a big deal of it. But you never brought Haru-sempai’s racket to our club activities. That’s when I started to think that maybe I’d done something terrible. That Haru-sempai’s racket was a far heavier burden than I had ever imagined. I’m sorry, Katsura.”

“Onee-sama...”

Tattered tears fell from Katsura’s eyes. At that time, her onee-sama must surely have been hurting. Even so, she had said sorry. When surely it was Katsura herself who should have been apologizing.

“Even after I graduate, as long as there are people in the club who remember Haru-sempai, you won’t use that racket, will you? In that case, it’s not just you that I should apologize to, but also Haru-sempai. Therefore...”

Therefore, she took a chance.

“You gave your racket to Mizue-chan...?”

“Yeah. I told her that she had to use it, and not just hang it up on the wall.”

And true to her word, Mizue had used it during practice. Did that mean that for her, the racket was of no special significance.

“But I misunderstood once more, and caused you even more pain.”

Her onee-sama used a finger to wipe the tears from Katsura’s face.

“You’re wrong about that.”

Katsura shook her head.

“I love you, onee-sama. And thinking that, the tears came.”

“Oh.”

Onee-sama smiled, and this time she ran her finger over her own cheek.

“Then, in that case, I’m glad you told me your feelings so directly, Katsura.”

As her onnee-sama’s damp hand took hold of her own hand, Katsura thought:
Yumi-san.

In the end, you were wrong about it not being a bigger deal than I had imagined, but I’m glad I took the chance to tell her about my feelings.

Sometimes it works out better than you had imagined too.

Me and the Interviewer

Part 1.

For some reason, she had a bad feeling about things.

It's not something that could be put into words, but for the last two or three days she hadn't been able to calm down.

It was as though someone was watching her, or following her – that kind of sensation.

It could just be her imagination. Or maybe an evil spirit had attached itself to her. If it kept going for too long she'd have to have an exorcism performed, something that would make it leave.

“Mami, you can’t sense anything?”

Tsukiyama Minako asked her petit soeur, who she had unexpectedly encountered in the hallway.

“Nope?”

Mami had a quick look around the area, then shrugged her shoulders.

“If you’re talking about signs of life, then there’s a lot of high school students scattered around all over the place – ”

“That’s not what I was talking about.”

It wasn't long ago that the morning classes and home room had been completed. The halls of the high school buildings were filled with students going here and there.

“Are you sure you haven’t caught a cold?”

Mami asked, putting her hand to Minako's forehead. Minako shook her off, saying 'Quit it.'

"Tomorrow's the graduation ceremony, you know. Why don't you go home and get some rest? Or maybe have a lie down in the infirmary?"

"Don't treat me like I'm some sick person. I will not be going home now, nor will I go to the infirmary."

"Oh? You have business to attend to?"

"... Pretty much."

During that pause, Minako thought she was being set-up for a one-liner from Mami, but nothing came. Instead she got:

"Well then, I'll give you this."

"A bread roll?"

What she was offered was a single bread roll in a thin paper bag.

"We were planning on having an editorial meeting this afternoon in the clubroom, right? So I bought you a bread roll from Milk Hall. Since the meeting was canceled, please go ahead and eat it. Or if you brought a lunch-box, I could go and fetch it for you."

"I didn't bring one. Anyway, why was the meeting canceled?"

"Hidemi had a sudden toothache."

"What a spoiled child. She's your petit soeur. It's just a toothache. If she had any willpower, she'd still be able to attend a meeting."

"Well, that's true."

Mami kept holding the paper bag by its opening with her right hand, and folded her arms across her chest.

“If it was just Hidemi, then I’d be saying the same thing. But two others left with a stomachache and a headache, so I didn’t press the matter.”

Two others?

“They’re not faking it?”

“Geeze, onee-sama. Don’t you think you’re being paranoid?”

“... I guess.”

This is Lillian’s Girls Academy. We are all children of our mother in heaven, Maria-sama. There would be no-one here who would feign an illness, or doubt people without any proof – Well, let’s just set that aside for now.

But if that was true, then the newspaper club was full of sick people. More than Minako, it was her juniors that needed the school infirmary.

“They’ve all gone home to rest up, but I expect they will all be perfect for tomorrow’s graduation ceremony. All of us are the Lillian’s Girls Academy Newspaper Club and – ”

“Yeah, yeah. I get it.”

Mami usually offered up a good argument, but Minako wasn’t in the mood to hear it, so she took the bread roll she had been offered. When she went to take out her purse, she was told ‘It’s a graduation gift.’

“Thank-you.”

After saying this, Minako turned away from her petit soeur. Her graduation present was a single bread roll. More surprisingly, it was enough to bring tears to her eyes.

Part 2.

And, as usual, the bread roll that Mami had given her was hot enough to bring tears to her eyes as well.

A spicy potato-salad sandwich.

Such an intense and unique item would never gain widespread popularity, but it always had a number of incredibly obsessive fans which meant its name had remained in the list of breads on sale for a very long time. They didn't keep a lot in stock, so it was rare to be able to buy one over the counter at Milk Hall. It was probably because they hadn't taken orders from the various classes today.

There were no classes this afternoon because of preparations that were being made for the graduation ceremony. About half of her classmates had gone home, and of the remainder about two-thirds had gone off somewhere leaving only a few people remaining in the classroom. Two of the groups had taken in people from other classes and were having a small party.

Seeing Minako eating her lunch alone, they had invited her to join them but she politely declined. She appreciated their kindness. But being the outsider in a group of close friends having a farewell party, she would either have been an intrusion or they would have gone out of their way to make her feel included. It was better that she remained by herself.

These ... the previous Rosa Gigantea, Satou Sei, used to like these. Minako reminisced as she bit into the spicy potato salad sandwich.

Really, what had she become.

Keeping data on someone who had graduated a year ago. She should have erased that from her brain.

Minako didn't know what she would do with all the information she had gathered up to this point, like student's home phone numbers.

Certain student's blood types.

Birthdays.

Characteristics of how their school tie was knotted.

Minako had a mountain of this data that she would have no use for after she had graduated.

“Business to attend to, huh.”

Mami had said this to her, but if she really did have something definite to attend to then she wouldn’t have just been sitting around like she was.

And yet, somehow.

Right, somehow she found it hard to go home, so she stayed at school.

She didn’t have anything she wanted to do. She just wanted to be here.

Even if Minako stayed back late, she couldn’t work on the Lillian Kawaraban anymore. Despite this, without noticing it, she was still seeking out conversations that could be turned into articles. Thinking of eyeball-grabbing headlines. Her fingers were itching to be tapping away on the keyboard.

Having been so engrossed in the creation of the school newspaper, this must be the fade-out now that she was at the end. Tomorrow was the graduation ceremony, and there was no way one of the graduating students would be able to report on it for the graduation commemorative edition.

Even so, just being here like this wasn’t too bad. Minako smiled wanly then stuffed her mouth with the remainder of the bread roll.

(Nevertheless)

That Mami was so thoughtless. She could have at least brought a milk coffee with the bread roll.

“... That’s fine.”

The taste definitely grew on you.

Of those spicy potato-salad sandwiches.

Part 3.

“Minako-san.”

When she went out for a settling walk after lunch, there was Ogasawara Sachiko-san.

Looking just as beautiful as ever. Her long, silky, black hair. The tasteful, shapely parts all exquisitely arranged on her face. Everything about her just seemed to ooze grace. A beautiful voice that you listened to in rapture.

“I’d like to talk with you, is that okay?”

“Huh? What’s this about?”

Even as Minako maintained an outward calm, her voice rose with excitement.

Her heart beat in anticipation. Since she was standing out here, it must have meant that Sachiko-san had come here especially to see her.

The newspaper club always wanted to hear her conversations. And they were always following her around. Surely Sachiko-san must have tired of their habitual and aggressive actions by now.

So then, why was she here? Sachiko-san had approached her, saying she wanted to talk. What on earth could have happened?

(Something happened...?)

Yes, undoubtedly something had happened.

“Here’s not really a good place. How about we go somewhere where there’s fewer people – ”

(Something she can’t talk about!?)

Sachiko-san didn't usually pay any attention to whether or not people were watching her, so this must be some top-secret information.

Certainly, something like this had happened before. About a year and a half ago, when the newspaper club had been chasing after Fukuzawa Yumi-san who was rumored to be a potential petit soeur for Sachiko-san.

(Well...)

Minako glanced sideways at Sachiko-san. Back then they had been quite forceful in the way they went about gathering data. According to what she heard afterwards, Yumi-san was quite troubled by it because she wasn't used to being the center of attention. Apparently unable to stand idly by, one day Sachiko-san had shown up at the newspaper club and dazzled them with an offer to provide information about it, on the condition that they promise to stop chasing after Yumi-san. Naturally, the interview with Sachiko-san that ran in the following day's paper was wildly popular with the readers.

This pattern of events was just like what had happened back then. Just like before, a huge story seemed to have dropped into her lap.

And because Sachiko-san had approached her about it first, there should be no problem in using their conversation as part of an article for the Lillian Kawaraban. It wasn't just that she wanted to write an article, but if things went well this would be a nice parting gift to her juniors.

(All right!)

When Minako clenched her fist in front of her chest, Sachiko-san looked at her doubtfully and asked 'Minako-san?'

"Oh, excuse me."

Danger, danger. By letting loose in front of her guest, Minako was letting them in on her world.

“I was thinking we should go somewhere quiet with no-one around to have our talk. Minako-san, do you know of anywhere we could use?”

“Let me think...”

Minako looked back at the classroom. At this time of day, all the third year classrooms were probably in a similar state to hers. So they were out.

Looking out the hallway window into the courtyard, there were fewer students but still some scattered around the courtyard, so that was no good either.

The library would be quiet, but it would probably be too quiet and their conversation would leak to others.

And because they were just two students talking, they wouldn’t be able to borrow the guidance counselor’s room.

Sachiko-san’s stronghold, the Rose Mansion, usually had people in it after school. And she might even want to keep this a secret from her friends.

There conversation had reached an impasse after Sachiko-san had posed the question of ‘where?’

Where else is there? – thinking this, Minako had a flash of inspiration.

“How about the newspaper club’s clubroom?”

“The newspaper club’s clubroom?”

Sachiko-san asked to confirm.

“But, won’t all your club members be there?”

“Don’t worry about that.”

Mami had spoken to her earlier. The scheduled editorial meeting was canceled. The girls with toothache and headaches had already left, and even

those members that were healthy would have gone home since the meeting was canceled.

“It’ll be a bit cramped compared to the Rose Mansion, though.”

“Not at all, I apologize for intruding.”

With Sachiko-san’s consent, the two of them headed towards the clubhouse.

Part 4.

“How did it come to this?”

Sitting on a chair in the clubroom, Minako looked at the two people in front of her.

“What do you mean, this?”

One of the two was Sachiko-san, who had accompanied her here.

“Didn’t Sachiko tell you? That we wanted to speak to you?”

The other one you could call Sachiko-san’s partner in crime, Hasekura Rei-san. Rosa Foetida.

The Red and Yellow Roses were seated on the other side of the desk to Minako, and looking at her with composed expressions. Usually, the innermost chair was the seat of honor, but her two guests stubbornly refused to move from their positions. Encamped by the door, they probably intended to block any attempt Minako might make to flee.

“Well, she definitely said that. Although I didn’t hear anything about you lying in wait for me, Rei-san.”

“Oh, I must have forgotten to mention that Rei had gone on ahead of me. We thought you might be suspicious if we both showed up, so we thought one of us should go and bring you here. That’s all.”

“Go and bring me here?”

So their target was the newspaper club’s clubroom from the outset, and their prior conversation had just been to draw her here.

They’d caught her unprepared.

Minako had been completely taken in by Sachiko-san’s meek appearance. Ahh, she’d been completely blinded by her desire for a scoop, and was now left looking foolish.

But, still, who could have imagined that Rei-san was lurking in the locked clubroom, or that both her arms would be seized the moment she stepped inside?

“Mami. You’re there, aren’t you? You’re their accomplice in this, I’ll bet.”

Venting her frustration, Minako looked at the door between Sachiko-san and Rei-san and called out, loudly.

It would have been impossible for Rei-san to go into the staff room and nonchalantly retrieve the key for the newspaper club’s clubroom. Which naturally led to the idea that there was someone helping her. Someone for whom retrieving the key wouldn’t be out of the ordinary. And someone who could innocently return the key after Rei-sama was inside. In short, it had to be someone in the newspaper club.

“I’m sorry, onee-sama. But I was helpless when faced with the awesome power of Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida.”

Just as Minako had expected.

The feminine voice answered her from the other side of the door. The answer, and the way it was said, made it sound like something from a cheap drama. Minako was definitely not amused.

Upon reflection, the newspaper clubroom was a little, no make that a lot, cleaner than normal. The usual clutter of papers were stacked neatly on the

shelves, and the computer and printer had been shifted slightly. As though an infrequent clean-up had just recently been completed.

And thinking back on it, her conversation with Mami in the hallway had probably been to plant the idea of coming to the newspaper club's clubroom in her head. This wasn't some spur of the moment deal, but a meticulously planned and rehearsed operation. The toothache, headache and stomachache were probably a pack of lies too. Oh Maria-sama, please forgive this naïve fool.

"Oh, by the way, Hidemi really did have to leave to see the dentist."

Sensing what she was thinking, Mami's voice came through the doorway.

"Hmm, now you tell me."

Was that supposed to make it any better, having a single truth mixed up in all of this?

It seemed as though she had no choice but to accept the situation. Minako settled back in her chair and turned defiant.

"And so? What is this? Have you come to settle some old scores?"

Thinking about it, it was completely out of character for Sachiko-san to approach the newspaper club to discuss something. Let alone divulge her years of memories on the eve of graduation.

"A settling of scores, you say?"

Sachiko-san smiled. Then she produced a small note-taker from somewhere and pressed the record button.

"I will now begin our exclusive interview with Tsukiyama Minako-san."

"Huh!?"

Their rationale was as follows:

For the past three years, Tsukiyama Minako had been single-minded and, at times, quite aggressive in how she went about gathering information. If things continued like this until graduation, there could be no closure. So it would do her good to have the tables turned on her just once.

“Wait, hold on just a moment.”

“We will not wait.”

Quite right. If her opponent asked her to wait, there’s no way she would hold back.

“As this is the first interview, we’ve been checking up on you for the last couple of days.”

“What do you mean?”

A glance at the scattered papers that Rei-san spread out over the desk revealed that they contained detailed notes about her actions during the last few days at school.

Her school arrival and departure times, how she spent her lunch break (where she was, who she was with and what she ate), who she talked to that wasn’t in her class – .

“I get it. You’ve been following me.”

“It was surprisingly easy to follow you. You didn’t notice a thing.”

“I noticed. I had a bad feeling.”

“Even so, you didn’t work out that it was us, did you Minako-san?”

“When you swept your gaze around, you were never able to pick us out of the swarm of people in the same school uniform, right?”

In other words, when she had discreetly looked around Sachiko-san or Rei-san had been amongst the crowd of students. That was somewhat vexing.

“Tsukiyama Minako-san, what’s your most profound memory of your three years in high school?”

“Huh?”

That’s a fairly abrupt change of topic, Sachiko-san.

“Hmm, let me see – ”

“Please tell us about what you plan to do after graduation. Share all of your thoughts about the future.”

As soon as she had finished answering the first question, Rei-san asked her another one.

“What’s your favorite phrase?”

“Which subjects do you like?”

“Sum up your thoughts about Lillian’s Girls Academy in one sentence.”

The two of them took turns bombarding Minako with prepared questions. They were all quite banal. Uninteresting details. This was probably just another part of their harassment.

“Hey.”

Minako opened her mouth.

“This is kind of boring, isn’t it? Asking me these kinds of questions.”

“You’re right.”

Sachiko-san agreed, and pressed the stop button on the recorder.

“Huh?”

Not actually expecting them to stop, Minako was dumbfounded.

“So, are we done?”

“The interview was just a pretense.”

Rei-san smiled.

“A pretense …”

“If we hadn’t done that, we wouldn’t be able to have a nice, long chat with you.”

As she said this, Rei-san leaned over and took something out of her bag. After Sachiko-san had cleared away the note-taker, Rei-san placed three containers of milk coffee on the desk.

“We’ll only need until we’ve finished these, for our friendly chat.”

“I don’t understand.”

A friendly chat. Why a friendly chat here? Why did these people want to have a friendly chat with her? Inside Minako’s head, these questions were swirling around in confusion. Watching this spectacle, Sachiko-san smiled.

“I’m not sure when, but you spoke with Yumi. Some time when you weren’t collecting data or preparing a story. She said it went well.”

“Well?”

Yet another thing that Minako didn’t understand.

“I don’t know the details, but apparently she learned a lot from it.”

“No way.”

“Come now, my petit soeur is not one to lie.”

Sachiko-san smiled. Was that a joke? No, probably not. Sachiko-san was always deadly serious.

Just when did she become the sort of person that could so openly praise their petit soeur like that? At the very least, when they had started high school she was a grumpy, hard to please person who seldom smiled. Quite the changed person.

“I don’t think I explicitly taught her anything, more that your petit soeur was able to derive a lesson from a meaningless conversation.”

After putting down money for the milk coffee, Minako took one of the packs, inserted a straw and gulped it down. If the two Roses wanted to continue to chat, she wasn’t going to allow them to hold this over her.

“Once more, you’re not making yourself very endearing.”

“Well, that’s just Minako-san’s way, isn’t it?”

Rei-san and Sachiko-san both took their milk coffees.

“Speaking of petit soeurs,”

Minako suddenly thought of something, and changed the topic.

“Yumi-san, Yoshino-san and Shimako-san all made something cute for the White Day return gifts, didn’t they?”

If they were just having a chat, any topic should be fine.

“As usual, you have keen hearing.”

Well, that’s true. Even though she had retired from making the newspaper, her intelligence gathering antennae had not grown dull.

“Those girls, they couldn’t wait for White Day and so they made and distributed their gifts the following day.”

“Their reasoning was that things would be in chaos because of the approaching graduation ceremony, and they might not have a chance to see each other because of class scheduling.”

“Purses, weren’t they? After they’d finished they had to hand them over right away.”

The older sisters shared a glance as they spoke.

“Still, I can understand how they felt.”

Minako murmured. Sometimes she’d be gathering information for a story to put in the Lillian Kawaraban two editions later, but when she finished the article sooner than expected she would want to put it in the next edition. It was the same thing.

“So it’s not that they didn’t wait for White Day, it’s that they couldn’t wait.”

The three of them laughed.

“And how about you two? Did you also get the handmade purses?”

The response of ‘We didn’t’ was instantaneous from the two of them.

“I see. How did that make you feel?”

She felt like delving into this a bit deeper. She thought it was a long shot from the start, but surprisingly they answered in a carefree manner.

“Part of me was disappointed, but part of me was okay with it. It was a complicated feeling.”

“If it had been something that Yoshino had worked her heart out to make then I would have wanted it, but because she made it with the others I didn’t. Oh, Minako-san, why are you smiling?”

“Huh?”

Minako hadn’t realized that she was as she listened to them talk. But she definitely did seem to be smiling. Listening to Rei-san and Sachiko-san speak when they weren’t on guard, being able to see them as they really were, made her feel happy.

“I was just thinking that friendly chats are surprisingly good.”

If she was to put what she heard here into the Lillian Kawaraban, it would probably make her readers very happy. But, bad luck. This was a friendly chat. It would be uncouth of her to turn this unguarded conversation between friends into an article.

After about thirty minutes of chatting in the clubroom, the pair of Roses left.

“This was fun.”

“Later”

Those words stuck with her.

As she saw them off, Minako pondered the question she had thought of a while back, but hadn’t voiced.

(Hey. Why did you choose the newspaper club’s clubroom as the location for our friendly chat?)

She didn’t ask, but she had a rough idea of the answer.

Those two had been checking up on her movements. So they must have known how many times a day she would walk to the front of the club house, but then return without going inside.

Sachiko-san and Rei-san understood Minako’s feelings.

What that pair knew, Minako too knew.

And some things are better left unsaid.

This is what they call empathy.

Graduation Group Photograph

Part 1.

It's almost time, she thought as she left the photography club's clubroom whereupon she ran into Hasekura Rei-sama and Yamaguchi Mami-san in the clubhouse hallway.

"Hey."

Tsutako first called out to Mami-san in a low voice, but then she saw Rei-sama, bowed her head and said 'Gokigenyou.' The difference in greeting was due to the fact that Mami-san was her friend and classmate, whereas Rei-sama was in the year above her.

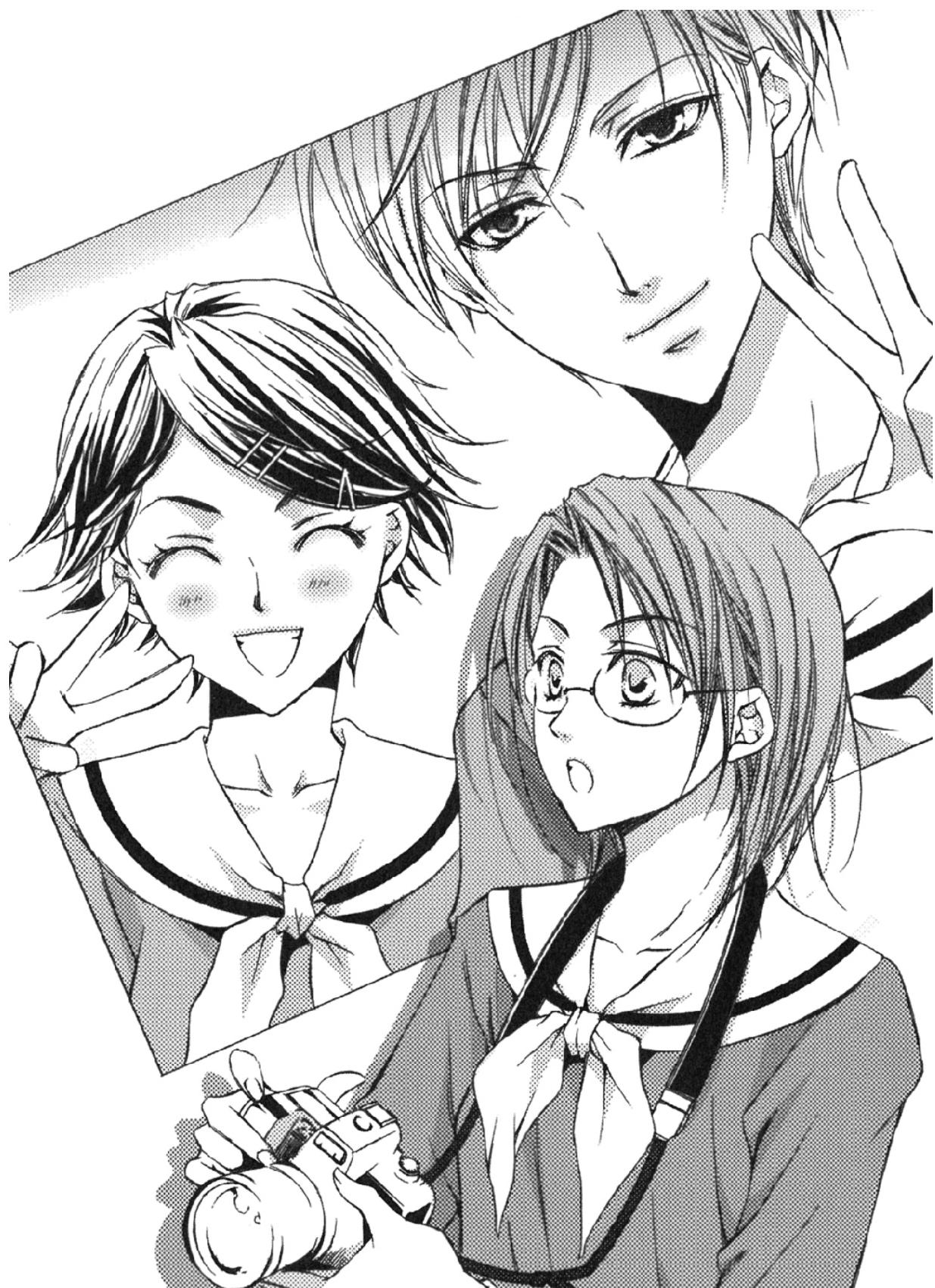
"What an unusual combination."

As was her habit, Tsutako instinctively reached for her camera upon finding a good subject. Just what was it that brought these two together anyway?

Mami-san was a member of the newspaper club, who used the room next door as their clubroom, so she was a common sight in the clubhouse while Rei-sama, as a member of the Kendo club, was quite obviously outside her territory.

"Hehehe."

The two of them responded by giving the peace sign, so Tsutako didn't refrain from clicking the shutter.





“Are you doing something after this?”

Tsutako changed the angle and took another shot.

“We are.”

Rei-sama and Mami-san looked at each and smiled mischievously.

“Ahh, but you have to keep this a secret from Minako-san.”

Rei-sama placed her index finger over her lips.

What ‘this’ was, was Rei-sama going into the newspaper club’s clubroom. Minako-sama was Mami-san’s onnee-sama.

In summary, it looked like Rei-sama and Mami-san were joining together to play a prank on Minako-sama. No, it probably wasn’t limited to just those two people. Rei-sama’s petit soeur, Yoshino-san, and others were probably involved too.

“Yeah, I get it.”

Once Rei-sama was inside, Mami-san stood out in the hallway giving her orders.

“I know it’s a bit dark, but don’t turn on the lights, because you can see inside through that window.”

“Okay.”

It looked like Mami-san’s role was to setup a situation wherein Rei-sama is hidden inside the supposedly empty clubroom.

Now that Tsutako had seen this much, she was interested in seeing how it played out. Part of her wanted to go back into her clubroom, press her ear

against the wall and strain to hear what was said next door but, unfortunately, she had arranged to do something now. The hairs on the back of her neck were tingling, but there was nothing she could do about it.

“If it goes well, I want to hear about it later.”

Tsutako whispered to Mami-san, then left the club house.

“Well, I wonder what’s coming next.”

Tsutako headed off to take the ‘Graduation Group Photograph’ for her seniors in the photography club.

Part 2.

The traditional group shot of graduating students from the photography club.

To be nominated to take that photograph meant that your talent had been recognized by the third years, so was a singular honor to students in the photography club.

– Or, at least, that was the outward appearance. In reality, it was an ordeal where you had to listen to the graduating senior’s final selfish demands.

Those were the rules.

The person taking the photograph had to take it in accordance with the orders given by those having their photo taken. No matter how unreasonable the demand, it was always justified by saying ‘You should be able to do that, right?’ It was meant as a backhanded compliment. But despite being such a bloodthirsty affair, every year without fail they produced a good photograph, that was highly valued by the newspaper club.

But that just increased the pressure.

(Especially because the seniors don’t really like me.)

So part of her wished they had chosen some other club member to be their photographer. No matter how skilled they were, you wouldn't want someone you didn't like taking your photo, right?

But, she was the one who had been selected. So she couldn't run away and had to face the music.

(Anyway.)

What would they ask her to do? Tsutako had no idea, so she wasn't able to come up with any counter-measures.

Incidentally, the requirement last year was that the photograph had to be taken at an instant when they were all genuinely laughing. The photographer started telling a number of jokes and got a few laughs here and there, but not one hundred percent. This kept going for 30 to 45 minutes. But still the seniors wouldn't laugh. Eventually the poor girl broke down in tears. At that point, all the seniors simultaneously started laughing. – Or so she'd heard.

A rumor. It was just a rumor. The people having their photo taken had all graduated, and the one who took the photo didn't want to talk about it.

The only thing she was sure of was that the person who took the photograph last year was on the other side of the lens this year. It seemed unlikely they would use the same gimmick as last year, but maybe she should take some eye-drops just in case.

Part 3.

The courtyard was the agreed upon location.

Other club members weren't permitted to be present. So she had kept the time and location secret from everyone else, especially Shouko-chan, who the seniors had dubbed 'Takeshima Tsutako's henchman.' If she had been told about it, she definitely would have shown up.

The third years had already arrived.

Seven people in total.

Oooh, there was someone she hadn't seen for about six months.

"Right on time."

One of them remarked, grinning, upon recognizing Tsutako's figure.

"Hah. Arriving late would have been out of the question, but if you wanted me to come earlier you should have said so."

"So it would seem."

"..."

Tsutako wasn't interested in being rebuked about things unrelated to the photograph. So she had been constantly looking at her watch on the way over. She had been adjusting the pace at which she walked so that she would arrive at exactly the arranged upon time of two o'clock. That was how it was. Cleared up with a single phrase, 'So it would seem.'

But at least they weren't accusing her of having forgotten the time. If she had deviated even a tiny bit, they probably would have said things like 'Why didn't you come at the time we arranged?' What a pain.

"Okay, let's stop messing around."

That phrase must have been a signal, because all the third years quickly moved into position for their group photo. The three in the front row were crouching down, while the four in the back row were standing in the gaps between them.

It looked like they had rehearsed this. This is going to be tough, Tsutako thought.

"How do you want me to take the photograph?"

At any rate, Tsutako had no choice but to find out what they wanted done.

“It’s simple.”

The senior in the back row, on the far right from Tsutako’s point of view answered.

“Stand over there and hold up your camera, then when we all say so click the shutter once.”

She was the former head of the photography club.

“I stand here, hold up my camera and then when you all say so I click the shutter once.”

Tsutako repeated what she had heard in order to confirm it.

“Right.”

Right, she said.

Well, part of that was simple.

Of course Tsutako would have no problem with standing there with her camera ready, or clicking the shutter. The problem was with the ‘when we all say’ and ‘once’ parts of it.

Because they had intentionally added the ‘once’ in there, it meant she would be limited to only taking one picture. So in that case, she couldn’t make a mistake. She had already taken a pile of photos where she only had one chance to make the shot. But how would she go when she had to take instructions on when to shoot.

Physically, it was so simple even an elementary school student could do it. But would she have the self-confidence to take a decent shot when ordered to.

“Once, right?”

She asked again, just to make sure, to which all seven of them loudly agreed.

“Right. We’re busy, you know.”

Liar.

The other day in the clubroom, weren’t you saying that everyone had time to kill because they had already settled upon what they were going to do after graduation? And today, you probably got here half an hour before I did just to practice precisely what you were going to do.

But Tsutako swallowed all the words she wanted to let out. Nothing good would come of saying them.

“There’s no way you’ll fail. You’re the photography club’s ace.”

The girl in the middle of the front row giggled. She certainly didn’t feel like an ace.

“I’m looking forward to it. We’re counting on you.”

It would be better with a tripod and a timer or remote shutter control.

(Ahh, is that it?)

Was that it? Were they saying that this prestigious job was just something that could be done by a gadget?

“Why are you dawdling, Tsutako-chan. We’re going to start the countdown whether you’re ready or not.”

Having been told this, Tsutako reluctantly brought the camera to her face. No matter how unappealing the circumstances, the photography club’s group graduation photograph absolutely had to be taken. It was tradition.

After the seven of them had finished straightening their collars or skirt hems, they smiled for the camera lens. They didn’t seem to be striking any

particular pose, but they all had their hands held down. Well, it's better than flashing the peace sign.

“Well then, take it on the count of zero.”

The countdown started five seconds out.

“Four... Three...”

Well, here it comes. Tsutako took a deep breath.

– But.

On the count of two, all of the seniors made a slight movement.

“Huh.”

Tsutako flinched, but until her mission of pressing the shutter on the count of zero was completed, she wasn't going to let go of her camera.

“One...”

Just then, the seven club members that were lined up to be in her picture each took out a camera and pointed them at her.

“Zero.”

Tsutako pressed the shutter.

At that moment, the sound that echoed around her was:

Click, click, click, click, click, click, click, click. – Eight in total.

“... You got me.”

Lowering the camera, Tsutako got down on her knees.

“Please just tell me why it happened like this.”

If they wanted a group photograph with them holding their cameras, it was an elaborate way to go about it. Keeping it a secret from the photographer by hiding the cameras behind their backs or in their pockets.

“If we told you about it beforehand, the photo wouldn’t have the same sense of tension in it.”

Breaking ranks, the former head of the club approached her.

“Well, that’s true.”

Clearly, if it was tension they wanted then Tsutako had plenty of that, so she didn’t have a comeback.

“Do you think you took a good photo?”

“... Yeah.”

Even without getting it developed, Tsutako had a sense of whether or not a photo was a good one. This year’s installment of the photography club’s graduation photo was a good one. It could hold its own when compared to last year’s.

“Then you’ll display the line of eight of them at the school festival, right?”

“Eight?”

Tsutako shook her head. As per their orders, Tsutako had only pressed the shutter button a single time.

“— huh. Oh.”

Indeed, the shutter had only been pressed once. But all up, there were eight cameras. And the sound of eight shutters clicking.

“You can’t mean...”

Starting with the former head of the photography club, they all broke out into huge grins.

“Ehhh.”

This was the worst. They knew Tsutako hated having her picture taken, but they were still planning on exposing her to public ridicule.

“If you could display a photo taken by Shouko-chan, there’s no way you wouldn’t show one taken by us, right?”

“Right –?”

The seniors laughed as they talked back and forth. In the end, they were all now part of the graduation group photograph commemorative association. As for their solitary second year partner, they had left her with something quite elaborate.

“A collaboration between the graduating students and Takeshima Tsutako. What do you think?”

The former head of the photography club slapped Tsutako on the shoulder as she was hanging her head in shame.

“What do I think, you ask?”

If she said she hated it, it was obvious it would make her seniors even happier. On the other hand, she didn’t feel like lying and saying something like ‘I’m so happy.’

At any rate, there was only one way she could sum up her current feelings:

“I’m speechless.”

— That’s all.

Sweet Bun Feast

Part 1.

She wasn't sure who it was that initially proposed the idea of having a sweet bun feast.

Was it Minori-sempai, or had she proposed it herself – Ayane pondered this as she ran her pencil across her sketchbook.

It must have came from one of them.

It came from one of them, but that proposal had been taken up and now looked like it was going to happen. Why? Because they had been searching. Searching for an excuse for the two of them to spend some time together.

Two o'clock in the arts room, awaiting tomorrow's graduation ceremony.

Until last week, the walls had been filled with oil paintings made during class, but these had all been returned to their creators. In contrast, the plastic busts that usually looked down from the shelves, the watering cans used for still-life pictures, dried flowers and other such things were casually piled on one of the tables in the corner. The floor looked as though someone had cleaned it, but there still remained a streak of charcoal about ten centimeters long.

The first thing you noticed when you walked into the art room was the smell that was composed of a number of things – the oil paints, the chemicals for developing photographs, glue as well as a number of lesser smells – but after a while you'd get used to it. 'Just like the smells in the toilet,' was how Minori-sempai liked to phrase it, although Ayane didn't really approve of that.

The art club's farewell party took place about a week ago. After school, their faculty advisor had bought cake sets for each of the club's members from a local cafe which they ate here. It was the first time she had ever had

cake delivered to her but, regrettably, it smelled of oil paints. (Incidentally, last year when they had ramen noodles at the farewell party, the smell was unaffected.)

So the farewell party was quickly wrapped up. The third years all retrieved their belongings from the club room and the preparation room and went home. The ceremony for saying goodbye was over, but Ayane felt as though there was still something that hadn't been done.

She hadn't been able to properly say 'Goodbye' to Minori-sempai. That thought was rattling around in her head.

So when she heard about the half-day holiday on the day before the graduation ceremony and the idea of having a sweet bun feast with just the two of them came up, it seemed like fate. – ahh, how wonderful. Parting was still too difficult for the two of them, she thought.

Needless to say, there were no club activities today, so after school the two of them were free to paint whatever they wanted in the art room.

Ayane would often eat bread crusts. When she sketched with charcoal, she used the white part of bread in place of an eraser, so the crust would always be left over. Not wanting to let it go to waste, she'd pop the crust into her mouth.

That's right, it was because she didn't leave anything behind that the conversation turned to eating bread, which led to today's sweet bun feast.

Unfortunately, they weren't taking food around to the classes today so she couldn't put in an advance order. It would be a disaster if they were sold out. She had planned on rushing over to Milk Hall after homeroom and cleaning, but one of her high-spirited group mates had said, 'Tomorrow's the graduation ceremony so let's do this thoroughly,' and she hadn't been able to easily slip away.

Ayane had arranged with Minori-sempai that whoever got there first would buy the buns. When Ayane got to their meeting point, in front of the drink vending machines, she didn't see Minori-sempai so she ran over to the

bread counter and bought four buns. Just as she was collecting her change, someone tapped her on the shoulder.

“What should I do with these?”

When Ayane turned around, Minori-sempai was standing there grinning wryly as she held six buns she had just purchased.

“I called out to you three times. Didn’t you hear me?”

Minori-sempai said she hadn’t called out a fourth time because she was making such a spectacle of herself. The short senior had been hidden amongst the crowd of people.

So that was why the table in front of her currently held six buns.

Four of them had already been eaten.

Even so, it was remarkable that among the set of ten they didn’t have two of the same item. It may just be her sense of style, but Ayane found the multicolored packaging, as well as their contents, aesthetically pleasing.

Because the goal of this wasn’t just to eat pastries in the arts room, they didn’t feel like leaving once they had eaten their fill.

“Since we went to all that trouble, why don’t we sketch the buns?”

Minori-sempai took two sketchbooks from the shelf and handed the one that had ‘Ayane’ written on it to her.

“Oh? Sempai, you haven’t taken your sketchbook home yet?”

“Nope.”

The sketchbook that her senior had placed down for her own use had ‘Minori’ written on it.

“I was going to take everything home, but I felt like I’d have to come back here for something. So I took a chance and left it here.”

“Hmm.”

Ayane understood, somewhat. It was the same as her – Minori-sempai probably felt like she still had something left to do.

“So I’m going to take it home today.”

It was at that time that Ayane realized this really was the end. But what could be a more appropriate way to end it than this.

“I’m sorry, but can I borrow one of your pencils, Ayane-chan?”

Minori-sempai had only left her sketchbook here, so she didn’t have any pencils suitable for sketching.

“Sure.”

Ayane retrieved her plastic case which contained about 15 pencils from the shelf. Opening the lid, she said, ‘Take whichever you want,’ to which Minori-sempai said, ‘Any one is fine,’ and picked out a 2B pencil without looking.

“Any one but that.”

Ayane split her kneadable eraser in two and tossed one of the parts to her senior.

Right, right.

Despite having all these buns, they didn’t have any plain white bread so today they wouldn’t be able to do charcoal sketches.

Part 2.

And so the two of them sat facing each other, with the sweet buns on the table between them, and began to sketch.

The rule was that when they got hungry they could reach out and take any of the buns they wanted. Because they were facing each other, they didn't know how far the other's picture had progressed. So there was always the possibility that the bun you were currently working on would be eaten, and vice versa, making it something of a thrilling game.

"That reminds me."

Minori-sempai stretched out her hand and took one of the buns.

"Ah."

Ayane wasn't disciplined enough to keep herself from instinctively calling out.

"Oh, was that a 'bingo'?"

"No, not really."

Not really, how? Actually, she'd hit the jackpot. Ayane was in the middle of putting the finishing touches on that cream bun in her picture.

But there was no point saying anything. Now that the package had been opened and a bite taken out of the bun, putting it back on the table wouldn't have helped.

"Hehehe, you don't look like you'd be very good at 'Old maid', Ayane-chan."

Not only that, but she'd been completely found out. There was no point trying to hide it. Ayane brazenly turned the pages of her sketchbook until she arrived at a clean page. There were still four buns remaining, but she'd have to start from the beginning again.

Old maid was probably Minori-sempai's specialty. When Ayane had taken one of the buns she hadn't even batted an eyelid. When Ayane had tried to feint and hold her hand over various buns to try and get a reaction, nothing. But it didn't seem like Minori-sempai had finished her drawing. From the other side of her sketchbook came the scritch-scratch sound of her pencil

moving across the paper. Occasionally, there was also the sound of her using the kneadable eraser.

“What did you mean by ‘that reminds me’?

Flustered, Ayane changed the topic.

“Huh?”

“You said that earlier. As you were taking the bun.”

“Oh, really? Hmm, what could it have been.”

She’d already forgotten. You’re probably no good at the card game ‘Concentration,’ right Minori-sempai? Perhaps her shoulder had become sore, as Minori-sempai stood up from her chair and stretched.

“Oh, Rosa Chinensis en bouton is running through the courtyard.”

Having been beckoned over, Ayane walked to Minori-sempai’s side and looked out the window. Really, it wasn’t so interesting that Ayane would normally go out of her way to see it. Because she was in the same grade as Rosa Chinensis en bouton, Fukuzawa Yumi-san, she’d often see her in the hallway or wherever. So it wasn’t a rare sight for Ayane.

“Shall we wager on where she’s going?”

“Ehh – ”

For a moment she was shocked, thinking, ‘Nice to have so much free time,’ but then it’s not like they were in a rush to finish their sketches. In that case, she thought it would be okay and when Minori-sempai said, ‘On the count of three,’ she readied herself to say the location she had struck upon.

“Milk Hall.”

“Milk Hall. Huh, the same? Why?”

Why indeed. Usually you could tell the destination of someone running from the direction they were headed. And earlier, when they'd been in Milk Hall, Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida had been in there, so she was probably running to meet them.

"Oh well. I suppose I'll take the old greenhouse then."

"But how are we going to find out the answer?"

It would have made things easier if Yumi-san had given them a piece of paper with the answer on it beforehand, but she hadn't, so they had no way of finding the answer. They could have called out, 'Hey Yumi-san,' but their voices wouldn't have reached her from this distance.

"Hmm, how about we make the loser go up and ask Yumi-san directly, as punishment?"

Minori-sempai stuck her index finger up in the air, as though she had just hit upon a great idea.

"... so then how do we decide who the loser is?"

"Ahh."

Minori-sempai clutched her stomach and laughed insincerely as though only just realizing this. Must be some kind of idiotic comedy. As the only thing they had to wager was the buns, the bet was abandoned.

"That Yumi-san. You know last year she carried one of the signboards all by herself."

Minori-sempai muttered as she looked out the window. She was probably referring to that incident before the third year's farewell party. Last year, just like this year, the arts club had painted the signboards and Yumi-san had come alone to pick them up.

"Back then I thought she was trying her hardest. But recently I've reconsidered."

Yumi-san had probably thought she would be imposing if she had asked for help, or she might have been refused. She had also seemed kind of obstinate.

“You don’t have to try your hardest, as long as you do the job properly. Don’t over-exert yourself. That way others can peacefully watch you.”

But the current Yumi-san definitely seemed the type to ask for help when she needed it. Come to think of it, what happened this year? Oh, that’s right, in exchange for an extension on the due date the arts club had delivered the signboard to the Rose Mansion.

“You have the same sense about you, Ayane-chan.”

“Huh?”

She was going to respond with, ‘What do you mean?’ but that would have been answered with, ‘Exactly like that,’ so she couldn’t pursue the matter.

“So that’s why I wanted to meet you, and even if I was going to prep school I’d come here from time to time.”

If she were to look at Minori-sempai’s smiling face it seemed like Ayane’s tear glands would let loose, so all she could do was wholeheartedly mumble ‘Me too.’

‘I too want to meet with you, to paint here with you on days we don’t have club activities,’ was what she meant. The moment when Minori-sempai had appeared, the nothings they spoke about, it was for these reasons only that she was in the arts room.

Ayane couldn’t put it into words, but she thought her feelings were probably conveyed. Minori-sempai reached out her hands and gently patted the much taller Ayane on her head.

“Oh, right. The pencil.”

Was what Minori-sempai said unexpectedly.

“Pencil?”

Ayane shook her head, wondering why Minori-sempai had brought up pencils.

“That’s what I was talking about earlier. When I said ‘That reminds me.’”

She was going to strike back with, ‘What took you so long?’ but remembering their earlier conversation she refrained, and adopted a listening pose.

“When we had our first sketching session, you hadn’t used a knife to sharpen your pencils, right?”

“Nah.”

It was fine to reminisce, but why was she re-opening these wounds at this late hour? Especially on such a solemn occasion.

“And then the girls in the grade above me all laughed at me, so I made sure to bring my sharpener to the next club meeting.”

“... You put it in and spin it around, yeah.”

It was a simple thing about two centimeters long that had a hole you stuck the pencil in. The hole was shaped like a cone and it had a blade on one side so that when you turned the pencil the shavings would come slithering out the side.

“Not only were you the first girl not to use a knife to sharpen your pencils, but you were the first to bring a pencil sharpener so you were a huge hit with us seniors.”

“It’s fine to say that now, but back then I didn’t know of any way to taper the end of the pencil other than with the sharpener. And while I was sketching, it would break.”

“Yeah.”

“And then the seniors would sharpen it for me.”

“But you quickly learned how to do it yourself.”

“Because I had special training.”

So as not to waste pencils, she'd used those throw-away wooden chopsticks. It had been hard to work out the right angle and amount of force to exert on the back of the blade with her thumb.

“That's right, it was because of that special training that I was able to meet you, Minori-sempai.”

“Really?”

Having forgotten, Minori-sempai shook her head. A senior who was hopeless at ‘Concentration.’ Or maybe it was just because she was so shy that she was pretending not to remember.

“But it looks like you've become quite good at it since then.”

Minori-sempai held the 2B pencil up in front of her eyes as she said this.

“How about we finish up our drawings?”

As Minori-sempai resumed her drawing, Ayane too took her seat.

Her senior seemed to be full, as she didn't take any of the buns that Ayane was working on. Consequently, she'd be able to finish the drawing fairly soon.

Whether the buns were eaten or not, time moved relentlessly towards the end. But they should be able to finish one commemorative picture.

Using the sounds of the pencils as cover, the two would occasionally exchange words. But there was no need to force a conversation. They had what you'd call an understanding.

“Are you done?”

When Ayane put her pencil down, Minori-sempai was looking at her, smiling. She had done the last spurt as though she was in a trance, so she hadn't realized that her senior had already finished drawing and was waiting for her.

"How about we swap pictures?"

"Sure."

Thinking Minori-sempai just wanted to have a look, she held out her sketchbook and was told, 'Not like that.'

"I'd like to take your picture as a souvenir, Ayane-chan. And in return, I'd like you to accept my picture."

"Umm."

Whoa, hold up before you make such an outlandish request.

"Swapping my drawing for one from a senior who's been accepted straight into a famous Arts College – the difference in level is just too great."

This drawing and that drawing. Although they were made of the same paper, you wouldn't usually exchange a 1 US dollar note for a 1,000 yen note.

"What are you complaining about? If it's not enough, I'll let you keep all the buns that are left over too."

"No, that's not it. If anyone's adding freebies, it should be me."

As she was saying it, Ayane was thinking: Freebies, what am I saying?

"But, you know, the worth of a drawing isn't determined by how skilled the artist is, so much as how badly someone wants it."

"Well, maybe..."

That was probably true. There were plenty of famous artists who weren't all that technically skilled at sketching. Conversely, there were probably people who could create photo-realistic sketches who were still largely unknown. Although because they were unknown, she couldn't think of any off-hand.

"So does that mean you want my drawing, sempai?"

"Didn't I just say that before?"

Usually, Ayane would draw because she liked drawing. That was all. So to have someone tell her that they wanted her drawing was a bolt from the blue. It was enough to shake her entire system of values.

"Well, in that case, please take it. But I don't need anything in return."

Ayane carefully tore the page out of her sketchbook and presented it to her senior. The fresh drawing of the buns she had just completed.

"Mmm, looks delicious."

Minori-sempai said, delighted. To Ayane this was a much better compliment than something like 'Well done.'

"Umm, sempai?"

Thinking about how good it felt to have someone want your drawing, Ayane realized she wanted to receive Minori-sempai's picture. Therefore, contradicting her earlier remarks, Ayane held out both her hands and said, 'Please.'

"Sure. But it's not a particularly delicious looking picture."

"Huh?"

Ayane didn't really understand, but nodded her head. Regardless of how it turned out, she still wanted Minori-sempai's picture. At least to have a look.

The sound of paper tearing.

“Here you go.”

When Ayane accepted the sketch and looked at it, she couldn't believe her eyes.

“....Huh?”

“A better reaction would be ‘looks delicious.’”

Minori-sempai laughed as she said this.

There wasn't anything like the buns on there.

Ayane's serious face was sketched in monochrome.

Support and Skinship

Part 1.

Seemingly an annual tradition, the ‘Search of the Rose Mansion for the Third Years’ Forgotten Items’ took place on the day before the graduation ceremony.

That ‘seemingly’ was deliberately added in there because she hadn’t participated in this last year. Noriko was only a first year. Although she’d heard about this from her onee-samas.

“Well then.”

“Shall we make a start?”

“I guess so.”

Having arrived a little late due to going to the staff room and other such places, and having just finished their lunch, the three second years stood up.

The second floor of the Rose Mansion. 2pm.

Seeing the three seniors starting to move off, the first years Noriko and Touko quickly attended to the washing up then followed after them.

The stage was the seldom used room on the first floor. Since it had been mainly turned into a warehouse there was the possibility that treasures could be discovered between the strata. So they held this annual excavation, to try and find the personal belongings of the graduating seniors and return them to their owners.

There were five people in this search party. Naturally, the third years did not participate.

“Well, this shouldn’t take too long.”

Were the words of Rosa Chinensis en bouton, Fukuzawa Yumi-sama.

“Even so, we have to do this for appearance’s sake.”

Rosa Foetida en bouton, Shimazu Yoshino-sama muttered, chuckling like an elegant lady.

“Oh, do you think we won’t find anything?”

This was Noriko’s onee-sama, Toudou Shimako-san. Despite only being a second year, she was Rosa Gigantea. Even if you took away the rose-colored glasses Noriko saw her through, she was still a beautiful, kind and smart – an impeccable lady.

“I wonder if we will find anything.”

As they descended the creaking stairs, the attitude of the members seemed to be anything but brimming with enthusiasm.

There was a reason that everyone was so ambivalent about this search. Because they knew they weren’t going to find anything.

Some time last week, either during lunch or after school, when both Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida happened to be present the conversation had turned to the search for lost items. At which point, Rosa Chinensis proclaimed:

“Well, in my case, there’s no way I would have forgotten any of my personal belongings.”

And then gave a small laugh, like ancient nobility in a comic. Since she was so filled with confidence, they all thought they wouldn’t find anything of hers. Support from that didn’t just come from the person herself. A few days ago, when the three second years went into the first floor room for an unrelated matter, they reported that they hadn’t seen any personal belongings of Rosa Chinensis or Rosa Foetida.

(On top of that.)

Noriko let out a sigh.

She hadn't said anything because she didn't want to trouble Yumi-sama, but yesterday morning she had witnessed Rosa Chinensis coming out of the room on the first floor of the Rose Mansion.

Having declared that nothing would be found, it would have been embarrassing for her if something was, so she had probably done a check prior to the search. Noriko hadn't actually seen this, but she assumed Rosa Foetida had probably done the same thing too.

So even though they were going to search, they weren't going to find anything. And because they had to search for things they wouldn't find, there was no sense of tension.

So while the search last year took place two days prior to the graduation ceremony, this year because it was a search 'for appearance's sake' that 'wouldn't take long' they were holding it the day before the graduation ceremony. It may have been a grave mistake, but because they didn't expect to find anything, they didn't see a need to leave a whole day free to return any items.

The second years were all somewhat busy seeing off their seniors.

Part 2.

The room on the first floor of the Rose Mansion was quite large, but it didn't get much sunlight. That probably explained why it was used so infrequently, and over time it had changed from a temporary storage area to something more resembling a closet.

According to Shimako-san, this was where they had previously rehearsed for their plays – although Noriko wondered if that was true. Because that story could have happened at most a year and a half ago, right?

At any rate, Noriko had only ever known it as a storeroom, one that was now packed full of all kinds of things. It could probably do with a good

clean out sooner or later.

“Well then, let’s decide on our areas and get started.”

The room was divided into five blocks, and the search commenced. Because the number of items differed between each area, when they were finished they would help someone else out.

“You don’t have to look between each sheet in the piles of cardboard.”

“If something is sealed, there’s no need to open it. But for those things that have the lid open, just take a quick peek inside.”

“Understood.”

“If you see someone’s private property, you should still pick it out even if it’s not Sachiko-sama or Rei-sama’s.”

“It’ll either be ours or someone else’s.”

“Hahaha.”

Having begun, it was surprisingly fun. It wasn’t a personal item, but Noriko found some stationery from the Rose Mansion underneath a desk. Unfortunately, the tip of the felt-tip pens had dried out, so they wouldn’t be able to use them.

After about twenty minutes, when everyone was getting ready to call it a day, Noriko called out in surprise. Caught between two cardboard boxes, she could see something fluttering.

“What? What?”

Everyone gathered around. It was probably a decoration, or a scrap paper used to make a note, but she wasn’t really sure exactly what it was.

However.

“Ahh, that’s – ”

Having slid the boxes apart and pulled out the item, Shimako-san turned and looked at the Red Rose sisters, Yumi-sama and Touko.

It was a black ribbon.

It was a bit short to use for wrapping and it looked quite sturdy, so it was probably a hair ribbon.

Neither Rosa Chinensis nor Rosa Foetida used ribbons in their hair. Yoshino-sama wore her hair in braids, but this had neither the length nor the volume to deal with that. And neither Shimako-san nor, obviously, Noriko used ribbons. So the only people in the Rose Mansion that it could possibly belong to were the Red Rose sisters. The pair of them both used similar ribbons to tie their hair, one on each side of their head – although they wore different colors.

“Is it yours, onee-sama?”

Touko asked Yumi-sama. Which probably meant Touko had no recollection of it.

Yumi-sama stared fixedly at the ribbon she retrieved from Shimako-san then. And then.

“... It’s mine.”

She mumbled, unconvincingly.

“What took you so long?”

Yoshino-sama butted in.

“Oh, I didn’t expect to find it again, so I was a bit surprised.”

Well, that’s true. Because they were searching for Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida’s belongings, it would be a bit disorienting to find something that you had thought lost.

(Huh?)

Something was nagging away at Noriko's mind. She could understand the surprise. The person herself had even said so. But why did Yumi-sama seem so absentminded?

"Come to think of it, I haven't seen you wearing those ribbons lately. I suppose it's because you lost one of them. But I don't understand how you managed to drop one of them."

Noriko watched as Yumi-sama laughed nervously in response to Yoshino-sama's words. Just as she thought, Yumi-sama still seemed somewhat absentminded.

After Yoshino-sama's question she evidently went into deep thought for about 30 seconds, before finally calling the conversation to a close with:

"Well, I think we're finished with the search, don't you?"

"Yeah"

Shimako-san agreed.

"Then, I suppose we're done for today."

It looked as though Yumi-sama had just remembered something she had to do.

"Looks that way. Don't worry about tomorrow."

"Right, right. We've already done enough preparation and practice."

Yumi-sama's behavior was incredibly easy to understand, so Shimako-san and Yoshino-sama hit her with a 'Hurry up and go do what you have to do' beam.

"Thank-you. Touko, you can go home ahead of me."

Leaving them with those words, Yumi-sama sped out of the Rose Mansion.

"I wonder what that was all about?"

Shimako-san and Yoshino-sama both shook their head. Apparently they had been supporting their friend even though they didn't know what her urgent business was. Meanwhile Touko remained silent, staring intently at the door Yumi-sama had gone through.

Because Noriko was standing diagonally behind Touko, she couldn't see what expression was on her face. If she would just turn this way, Noriko would be able to determine whether she was looking lonely or not.

Noriko thought she should talk to her, but didn't know what to say. As she was hesitating, Shimako-san called out.

“Touko-chan.”

Touko seemed normal as she turned around.

“Yes?”

“Do you want to follow Yumi-san?”

Shimako-san asked her so directly that Noriko started to feel nervous. Touko too seemed a little bit surprised.

“No.”

But she was smiling as she shook her head.

“I think that what my onee-sama is doing is in some way related to Rosa Chinensis.”

So I would be an inconvenience if I were to follow her, seemed to be what Touko was thinking.

Noriko finally thought she understood the situation. Yumi-sama had gone off to see Rosa Chinensis. And Touko had understood this immediately.

So when they left the room Touko didn't turn towards the entry, instead following Yoshino-sama and Shimako-san up the creaky staircase. Noriko followed after her, as though charmed by her hair. That's not to say that

Touko-chan didn't want to follow after Yumi-sama, it just seemed that she was containing her feelings inside herself.

"If you really want to, you shouldn't hold back, you know."

Once more, Shimako-san made a bold statement.

"You say don't hold back, ... but I'm not sure I want to chase her."

As she answered, Touko seemed to be collecting her thoughts.

"It's just, I don't think I'd be able to do anything if I followed her."

"You can't do anything?"

Stopping temporarily, Shimako-san turned around. And then awaited Touko's next response.

"When your onee-sama graduates, I think that's a huge thing. If I think about it happening to me in a year's time ... no, it's probably a much bigger deal for her."

Touko was probably openly explaining her feelings because Shimako-san was older than her. Or because Shimako-san was someone whose onee-sama had already graduated. Either way, Noriko felt superfluous.

She had no idea that Touko thought about such things. Not only that, but she wasn't thinking about her onee-sama's graduation, but her onee-sama's onee-sama's graduation.

"Because my onee-sama's bonds with Rosa Chinensis are so strong, it must be heart-breaking for her now that Rosa Chinensis is graduating. But she never shows those feelings, instead appearing as cheerful as ever. I know she's the only one who can bear this burden, but all I can do is watch. I want to do something to help her, but I don't know what I should do."

Shimako-san, who had been silently listening until then, resumed climbing the staircase. Noriko followed Touko up the stairs, wondering what kind of advice Shimako-san was going to offer.

Tap tap tap. When they had reached the top of the stairs, Shimako-san murmured:

“I suppose it’s fine, like that.”

“Huh?”

“It’s fine if you can’t do anything for Yumi-san, is what I meant.”

Graduation was the ultimate trial and gift given by an onee-sama. She hadn’t said as much, but Touko understood this. That’s why she’d said that Yumi-sama was the only one who could bear the burden. But even so, that’s fine. So does that mean that there are some things that a petit soeur can’t do? And thinking that probably hurt her self-belief, which was why she wanted to get some advice from someone else.

“But, you know, I’m not saying that it makes no difference whether you’re there or not, Touko-chan. Just being by her side probably gives Yumi-san all the strength she needs.”

“Are you sure?”

Touko seemed uncertain as she looked at Shimako-san.

“Of course. Since it’s Yumi-san, I think she would know that. Because she always treasured the words of the previous Rosa Chinensis.”

The previous Rosa Chinensis, that would have been Rosa Chinensis’ onee-sama. Which would make her Yumi-sama’s ‘grandmother’ and Touko’s ‘great-grandmother.’

“The words of the previous Rosa Chinensis – ”

Touko asked. Shimako-san smiled as she stood in front of the door nicknamed ‘The Biscuit Door.’

“‘The petit soeur supports,’ is what she said.”

“Supports...”

Somebody muttered. It could have been Touko, or Noriko, or maybe even Yoshino-sama. Perhaps all three of them at once.

Supports.

All of the people there were petit soeurs.

Part 3.

“Sorry, but I have to leave too.”

Yoshino-sama, who had gone into the room ahead of them, held her bag and her coat in her hands. Noriko, standing by the door, took a step backwards to clear the way.

“Thanks for your efforts today.”

“Gokigenyou.”

Waving as she left, Yoshino-sama’s figure served as a vivid reminder of Yumi-sama’s earlier exit, although the situation and her appearance were different. Yoshino-sama was probably going to meet Rei-sama. Either that, or she had something else to do. Either way, she definitely left the impression that she was on a mission.

“Well, I’ll be heading home too.”

On the other hand, Touko’s situation was different. She had the option of waiting here until her onee-sama returned, but she probably didn’t want to do that because she thought she would be a bother. Or maybe she was just faithfully following her onee-sama’s earlier ‘You can go home ahead of me.’ Having finished the cleaning of the second floor together with Noriko, Touko started making preparations to leave.

Yumi-sama’s belongings still remained in a corner of the room.

“Gokigenyou, Rosa Gigantea. Later, Noriko.”

Touko smiled as she stood in front of the door and buttoned up her school coat.

“Gokigenyou.”

Shimako-san returned the smile. Noriko gave a small nod as she said, ‘Later.’

After Touko had disappeared through the door, when they could hear the sounds of her footsteps on the staircase, Shimako-san called out ‘Noriko.’

“Uhhh.”

When Noriko turned around, Shimako-san was standing there holding her belongings. ‘When did she do that?’ Noriko initially wondered, but then moved on to questioning how long she had been spacing out, thinking about Touko.

“Umm, but that’s – ”

Noriko didn’t understand why Shimako-san was holding her coat and bag.

What was the meaning of this?

When Noriko looked at her, blinking, Shimako-san handed over Noriko’s items.

“Shimako-san?”

“Here.”

After Shimako-san put a hand to her shoulder and twirled Noriko around, she urged her onwards with a tap to her back.

“Even for friends, it’s enough just to be by their side.”

So please be there for her, was what she was saying.

“Touko-chan seems to be far more delicate than anyone had thought.”

You could say that. She'd been damaged by her onee-sama's onee-sama's graduation.

"Is that why you said what you did to her?"

Noriko asked.

"I wonder if it came out sounding like a lecture."

"Not at all. I think Touko was glad. That you were concerned about her. I'm happy to have that kind of an onee-sama too."

"Oh."

Shimako giggled at that.

"Then I think I'm going to disappoint you."

"Huh?"

"I'm not the kind of person who keeps an eye out for others. I only became concerned about Touko-chan because you were, Noriko."

"Ehhh."

But that disappointment made Noriko feel happy. She preferred a realistic, if slightly nepotistic, person to a saint.

"Hey. Touko-chan's already left the Rose Mansion."

So get a move on, Shimako-san was urging her. But Noriko stayed where she was.

"I wanted to be able to support you last year."

"Huh?"

"When I heard Touko's words, even someone with no imagination like me could picture it. Last year, even though you were only a first year, you had

to endure that alone.”

Ostensibly, Noriko was saying that she knew it must have been difficult for Shimako-san. But no matter how painful it was, it was a side of Shimako-san she wanted to see but would now never have the opportunity.

“I know that’s impossible. But still.”

Noriko couldn’t put it into words. The Shimako-san of a year ago was so pitiable. She wanted to go back in time and take hold of her hands.

“Thank-you. But although I didn’t have a petit soeur, I was embraced from both sides by my friends. So I was okay.”

In the way that she should be there for Touko, may be what she was saying.

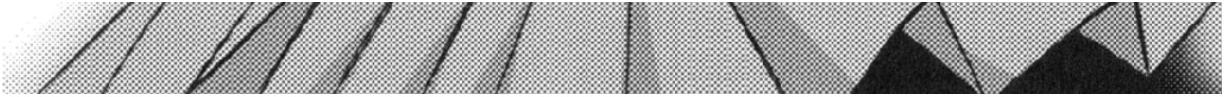
Noriko hadn’t been able to make it there in time, but Yumi-sama and Yoshino-sama were there for Shimako-san. Which was why she was alright.

“By the way, what is the onee-sama supposed to be doing while the petit soeur is supporting her?”

The words of the previous Rosa Chinensis. It seemed obvious that there should be a matching version for the older sister.

“Hmm, I wonder what it was... that’s right, embraces and protects.”





Embraces and protects.

“That’s exactly how I feel right now.”

Like a huge blanket, Shimako-san wrapped around her completely. So she was able to live peacefully.

“We follow the intent, but there’s not the same skinship, you know.”

Rather than staying here together, Shimako-san’s kindness was such that she would probably prefer Noriko to chase after Touko and go home with her. Even as she thought it was the truth, Noriko felt strange about it.

“However.”

Noriko dropped her belongings on the closest chair, then tightly embraced Shimako-san.

If she didn’t run all the way to the statue of Maria-sama, she probably wouldn’t be able to catch Touko now, but that was okay.

“We even have skinship, once in a while.”

“Oh Noriko.”

Leaving the smiling Shimako-san standing there, Noriko hurried after her friend.

Forgotten Things

Part 1.

What did she say?

When she heard those words, it was as though something had smashed into the top of her head.

“Supports...”

It wasn’t just Yoshino that muttered that word, but also Touko-chan and Noriko-chan.

So Yoshino thought that all the people that heard must have received an equally large shock. At the words of the previous Rosa Chinensis, Mizuno Youko, that came out of Shimako-san’s mouth.

To wit, ‘The petit soeur supports.’

* * *

That took place shortly after the completion of the search of the first floor storage room for Sachiko-sama and Rei-chan’s lost items.

It was when the four people that were left (the White Rose sisters – Shimako-san and Noriko-chan, as well as Touko-chan and Yoshino) were climbing the stairs to the second floor, after Yumi-san had left in a rush, apparently on some urgent task.

Despite walking in front, the conversation that was taking place behind her back between Shimako-san and Touko-chan seemed to be quite serious, so she was making an effort to listen to what was being said.

It was difficult, because our ears aren’t as efficient at hearing sounds from behind. Making matters worse, the sound of footsteps on the stairs was

accompanied by the creaking sounds of the old staircase itself. Given those circumstances, it was hard to make out what was said, but it seemed like Touko-chan was troubled because she wanted to do something for her onee-sama, Yumi-san, but wasn't able to do anything.

And the advice that Shimako-san gave regarding that was the aforementioned phrase, 'The petit soeur supports.'

Yoshino was frankly amazed. It felt as though God had come to visit and was knocking on the door of her heart. Either that, or using the telephone.

Hello, are you alright?

Now that Yoshino's heart had been called upon, she stopped to think about it.

Had she been able to act as Rei-chan's support? Hadn't it always been the opposite, with Rei-chan acting as the support that she leaned against.

Since Yoshino's successful heart surgery, her physical reliance on Rei-chan had lessened. But that's probably not what she was talking about when she said 'supports.' It was more about emotional support.

The petit soeur didn't have to do anything. Because just by being there, she would provide support.

So when the conclusion was that the petit soeur didn't have to do anything, Yoshino honestly thought that was wrong. Apologies to Youko-sama, but that's not the sort of thing you say to someone who's able bodied.

Certainly, there could be petit soeurs who didn't have to do anything.

But if you're not firmly planted on the ground, or twisting, or limp, there's no way you could be able to support anything.

Which was she? The former or the latter?

Having started to think about this, Yoshino couldn't just stand around idly.

“Sorry, but I have to leave too.”

Taking her coat and bag, the first step was to leave the Rose Mansion.

She hadn't thought about it.

And now it was too late.

She couldn't confidently say whether or not she had been a good support for Rei-chan for these past two years.

As Yoshino thought about the good and bad points of herself as a petit soeur, the preponderance of bad points jumped out at her.

I get it, that's enough. – Yoshino took a step forwards.

Anyway, as long as she's thinking, she should think about what she could do for Rei-chan. That would be much more constructive.

Out the door, Yoshino dashed down the path to the library. Why was she running? It's not like she had to hurry home.

(Ahh, is that it.)

Her thoughts were racing, and they were being expressed through her feet. Tomorrow was the graduation ceremony. Rei-chan wasn't going to be a high-schooler for much longer.

(That Rei-chan.)

Rei-chan was leaving, but she hadn't forgotten anything in the Rose Mansion.

If she had found anything, Yoshino could have delivered it to her neighbor. Although it wasn't like Rei-chan to be that negligent. Although Yoshino had hoped, just a little bit, that she had been.

But the only thing to come out of it was Yumi-san's ribbon.

They didn't find so much as a single eraser of Rei-chan's.

'I no longer have any attachment to this place,' was the sort of thing Rei-chan would say to Yoshino, but it made her feel incredibly lonely.

There was nothing left undone, and nothing left unsaid.

Yumi-san had told her that last year, prior to graduation, Youko-sama had taken her to Milk Hall and asked her to take care of Sachiko-sama.

And as for Rei-chan's onee-sama, Eriko-sama, she had called Yoshino out and said all she had to say. Of course, Yoshino hadn't meekly accepted this and had fought back.

But as for Rei-chan?

Who was there that she could leave word with?

(Ahh.)

As she thought about it, Yoshino felt the darkness closing in, until it seemed like she was standing in total darkness.

In reality, she was standing on the path lined with Ginkgo trees, with the Spring sunlight streaming through the branches.

Part 2.

"So, anyway."

As Yoshino started to talk, that person rested her chin on her hand and smiled.

"How rare of you to come and make contact with me all by yourself, Yoshino-chan. I wonder what set of circumstances led to this."

"I came here because I wanted to hear your thoughts, since at the time of your graduation you didn't have a granddaughter, Sei-sama."

‘So please help me,’ Yoshino said as she bowed her head. Yoshino was currently in a hall that appeared to be some kind of gathering spot for the university students. Although it looked like the university holidays had already begun, as there were only a smattering of students around.

Assaulted by feelings of despair and loneliness on the path lined with Ginkgo trees, Yoshino’s feet propelled her first to the University grounds and then towards Satou Sei-sama. Sei-sama was Shimako-san’s onee-sama, and the previous Rosa Gigantea.

Because there were so few university students around, finding Sei-sama had been easy. The garden with the fountain, in front of the stores, the university hallways, the spot with all the bulletin boards – . If there had been a lot of people walking around, she wouldn’t have been able to look at everyone’s face, but because there were only a handful of people she was able to sift through them. Whether that person was here or not was another question.

However, Yoshino eventually found Sei-sama as she was leaving the library. It was only by chance that she was there, returning a book she had borrowed.

After chatting for a while, Sei-sama agreed to accompany her here. Acting quite maturely, she had even treated Yoshino to a café au lait from the vending machine.

“... Well, that’s pretty stupid.”

A subdued Sei-sama mumbled.

“What is?”

Yoshino asked, not understanding what ‘that’ was referring to.

“Let me think ... Hmm, nah, it doesn’t really seem like you really, really wanted to see me and then just couldn’t hold it in any longer so you came here, you know?”

“Huh?”

“I’m not some kind of guidance counselor, yeah.”

At which point, Yoshino thought she’d ask about the person who had just sprung to mind.

“How about Yumi-san?”

“Yeah. But not so much lately.”

So would it have been alright if she had come earlier? Yoshino felt like snorting.

“And Shimako-san?”

Yoshino was thinking that if Yumi-san had come here, then what about her petit soeur, Shimako-san. However.

“Shimako? … I haven’t heard from her at all.”

It seems like she would have seen her, just for a little while, at the school festival.

“You don’t want to see her?”

“I don’t think about whether or not I want to see her.”

“I wonder if Shimako-san feels the same?”

It hadn’t been Yoshino’s intention to stick her nose into the business of other soeurs, but she was concerned so she had asked. She wanted to think that it wasn’t just out of curiosity.

“Shimako? I don’t know. But if she wanted to see me, she would. That’s how she is.”

If she wanted to see you, she would, huh?

Come to think of it, that was the kind of relationship those two had even when Sei-sama was in high school. They let each other do as they pleased, yet they seemed to be tied together at the core. Even after graduation, that hadn't changed. Although it seemed like the space between Shimako-san and Noriko-chan was somewhat different.

Huh? Noriko-chan?

"Ahh, that's right. Thank-you for the energy drink the other day."

Yoshino remembered that the day before the third years' farewell party, Noriko-chan and Touko-chan had been entrusted with some provisions.

"Those were from Santa-san, though"

"So I was told."

Even though they were told it was from Santa-san, they all knew who the real source was. Because even though she hadn't encountered Shimako-san, Sei-sama was well known to her petit soeur. What was she trying to do?

"In summary."

Sei-sama resumed their conversation.

"You want to know what the granddaughter-less Rei is feeling. And since I went through that, you thought I'd know, right?"

"That's about right."

Sachiko-sama had Touko-chan as a granddaughter. So if she wanted to entrust something about Yumi-san to her, she could. Or if she disagreed with something Yumi-san did, as hard as that was to believe, she could let Touko-chan know that too. But for Rei-chan –

"But, there's no way I could know that."

Sei-sama cut her down with a single stroke. Completely and utterly. With one hand tied behind her back. As though she was sparring with a training

dummy. With that done, Yoshino started to feel better.

“Is that so?”

“Not just because it’s Rei, you know. I don’t know what Sachiko’s feeling either. Because it’s someone else’s heart, yeah.”

Well, that’s true. But how about just a hint? Why so stingy? Was what Yoshino was thinking.

“But, say I did tell you what you should do, would you do it?”

“...”

Yoshino honestly didn’t know. If she said something like ‘do a handstand down the school hallway,’ she would probably refuse. There are things people can do, and things they can’t do. And that’s probably not the sort of thing that Rei-chan would want, anyway.

“Then it’s fine, right. You’d only do it if you came up with it yourself, anyway.”

Sei-sama made a shooing motion with her hands.

“But.”

“I’m not going to stand for any high pressure sales techniques, you know.”

When she heard the word ‘high pressure sales,’ the penny dropped for Yoshino.

“Well then, at least you could tell me this. Last year, was there anyone you entrusted something to? Like about Shimako-san, or the cat?”

Rei-chan would never admit it because she was so modest, but there may have been something she wanted to say, but no-one she could say it to. So this wasn’t a high-pressure sale. More like a door-to-door salesman. If there’s something you want to say, please say it. That kind of thing.

“Ah.”

Sei-sama clasped her hands together.

“There was someone, right?”

When Yoshino leaned forwards, ‘Not like that,’ was the negative response.

“I just remembered. Last year there was another high-pressure salesman. A young girl that kept pressing me, asking if there was anything I wanted to say about Shimako, or about Goronta.”

“... Yumi-san?”

Yoshino asked, timidly.

“Yep.”

“Ahh – ”

Yoshino cursed inwardly – everywhere she turned, Yumi-san was there waiting to ambush her. Yoshino’s line of thinking was that Yumi-san was too early, not that she had got off to a late start.

“So?”

At any rate, Yoshino wanted to hear what happened next, so she kept pressing Sei-sama for information.

“Nothing much? I didn’t have anything I wanted to ask her to do.”

“And with that she left?”

Yumi-san didn’t seem the type to just let things go so easily.

“Huh? Ahh – ”

“What?”

Sei-sama grinned, meaningfully. She may have been remembering something, but it was a bit repulsive.

“It wasn’t a big deal.”

“When you say it like that, it sounds even more interesting.”

Yumi-san and Sei-sama – just what went on between the two of them? In that case, she’d have to be sneaky. Don’t just teach Yumi-san, show some impartiality.

“Please tell me.”

Yoshino tried her hardest to appear terrifying as she leaned forwards, but of course it had no effect on a scoundrel like Sei-sama. Instead Sei-sama looked intrigued as she gave a dry laugh.

“Well then, let me give you a kiss on the lips and I’ll tell you.”

Sei-sama looked like an octopus as she pushed her lips out and pointed. Here, here.

“Hmmpf.”

Yoshino turned her head away from Sei-sama.

“In that case, no thanks.”

Better to just ask Yumi-san. Firstly, because it was Sei-sama, she wasn’t really badgering Yoshino for a kiss. It was just a performance to avoid telling her the story.... And secondly, it was in bad taste.

Nonetheless, upon being shot down Sei-sama made a fairly suspicious face for such a beautiful person. It was quite the sight to see.

“How boring.”

As she spoke, Sei-sama let her previous expression drop and adopted her usual, fair expression.

“Because I know you, I can hazard a guess. I’m not as interesting a toy to grope as Yumi-san, right?”

“Hmm. Perhaps. Oh? Why the long face? Don’t like it?”

“... Not really.”

Even though she had said it herself, Yoshino would rather be ‘interesting’ than ‘boring.’ Although she never meant to get into a contest with Yumi-san on this point.

“About Rei.”

Sei-sama said, after wetting her throat with the black coffee in her paper cup.

“I don’t think she’s really got any last request she wants to leave, you know?”

“But.”

As Yoshino started to speak, Sei-sama held her hand up to Yoshino’s mouth as though to say, ‘Wait until I’ve finished speaking.’

“But if you think there’s something, then maybe it’s because there’s something that you’ve forgotten to say to Rei.”

“Me, to Rei?”

Whoosh, it felt like the wind blew past her. Whether it was in her mind, or around her body, either way it felt like the wind blew straight through her.

Me. To Rei.

I see. Is that it.

“Thank-you.”

Draining the coffee from her cup, Yoshino stood up.

“What are you going to do?”

Sei-sama asked, glancing upwards as she remained seated.

“I’m going to give her something I’d forgotten.”

“Something you’d forgotten, huh.”

Now that Yoshino had decided, she was going to strike while the iron was hot. After gathering up her school coat and bag, she trotted off. Really, she wanted to break into a mad dash but she held back because she was on the university grounds. The traffic lights in front of her eyes had changed to green some time ago.

When she reached the entrance to the university hall, Yoshino said ‘Oh right,’ and turned around.

“Sei-sama. If you have time, why don’t you come to the graduation ceremony tomorrow.”

“Graduation ceremony?”

“Right. And invite Youko-sama too.”

“Youko? Yoshino-chan, do you want to see Youko?”

Sei-sama looked at her with a blank expression. Well, that’s understandable. There hadn’t been any mention of Youko-sama until just now. To be able to work out the real reason, you’d have to have ESP.

“It’s not really that, but wouldn’t she want to see Sachiko-sama in her finest hour – that’s what I was thinking.”

“... Hmm. Would she though? I see. It sounds like it’s going to be quite the interesting event.”

Did she really understand, or not? Either way, Yoshino gave her a big wave, said ‘Gokigenyou’ and left the hall.

“Now then.”

Only God knew whether or not it was going to be an interesting event.

Regardless, it was all tomorrow.

Consequently, she had some arrangements that she had to make today.

As she left the university grounds and stepped onto the path lined with Ginkgo trees, Yoshino broke into a sprint.

What's the Person Beside You Doing?

Part 1.

Touko walked with the words, ‘The petit soeur supports’ echoing in her mind.

(I don't have to do anything.)

Smiling, she entered the school grounds. Rosa Gigantea, who had just imparted those words to her, and Noriko still remained in the Rose Mansion that she had just stepped out of.

Touko turned around to look up at the second floor, before starting to walk again.

It wasn't from jealousy.

When she had said earlier that she didn't want to chase after her onee-sama, she had been telling the truth. Touko was happy for Sachiko-sama and Yumi-sama to be with each other.

Yumi-sama was the person that Sachiko-onee-sama had originally chosen.

Touko had been jealous, and opposed it thinking that Yumi-sama wasn't fit to be Rosa Chinensis' petit soeur. But at some point she had stopped being bothered by it and accepted it.

And then it seemed like her eyes chased after that vision.

Above all else, she enjoyed seeing Sachiko-sama together with Yumi-sama. As though she was watching a play from the spectator's seats.

The pair of them didn't have to realize she was there. Touko was fine with that.

But before she knew it, she had been pulled up onto the same stage – . And Touko was perplexed by that. While there was still the three of them, it was fine. But Sachiko-sama would soon be leaving them. When that happens, what should she do?

Touko knew that Sachiko-sama played an incredibly huge role in Yumi-sama's life. And the day that larger-than-life existence went away, the day a gaping hole would be opened in her heart, was approaching. And Touko didn't believe she could fill that hole.

“Oh, is that you Touko-chan?”

On the first floor of the school building, she ran into Rosa Foetida.

Alone.

Probably on her way home, as she was wearing her coat and holding her bag. And she probably thought the same thing upon seeing Touko.

“Gokigenyou, Rosa Foetida.”

So that was all Touko said as she bowed her head. It would show a lack of refinement to ask, ‘Are you alone?’ or ‘Are you on your way home?’

The first-year and third-year shoe boxes were a distance apart so they momentarily separated before reuniting at the entrance.

“That reminds me, how did it go?”

Rosa Foetida inquired.

“Huh?”

“You've just been searching the first floor of the Rose Mansion, right?”

The soft breath blew across the top of Touko's head, disturbing some specks of dust. It was times like these that drove home the difference between their

heights.

“Ahh, yeah, we have. Unfortunately, we didn’t find a single item of yours, Rosa Foetida.”

“I’ll bet. And Sachiko too?”

“Naturally.”

They looked at each other and laughed. No-one had come out and said that Rosa Chinensis had done a check of the first floor room, but it was common knowledge by now.

Suddenly remembering, Touko said:

“Although Yoshino-sama left the Rose Mansion a short while ago.”

“Oh, really?”

“She may still be at school though.... Would you like to go after her?”

If Rosa Foetida ran, she could probably catch her at the statue of Maria-sama, or by the front gates.

“Nah, not really.”

“I don’t mind, if you want to go on ahead.”

“It’s not that important.”

“Ahh, I see.”

Rosa Foetida and Yoshino-sama were cousins and neighbors, so they could see each other whenever they wanted to.

“... What is it?”

Touko asked, feeling Rosa Foetida’s eyes on her. Rosa Foetida just laughed.

“Oh, I was just thinking that recently you’ve stopped referring to yourself in the third-person.”

How to respond to that kind of question.

“I still do. At times suited to that character.”

“Character, huh?”

“... It’s like western style clothes. When the time and circumstances are appropriate, you pull them out of the closet and put them on.”

“I see.”

Rosa Foetida laughed loudly. She seemed to take that as a joke.

Was it a joke, or was it the truth? Touko didn’t really know herself, so she laughed along too.

“Sorry, but I’ll have to leave you here.”

As they passed through the entrance, Rosa Foetida turned towards the left.

“Are you returning home by the back gate?”

She asked without thinking. Usually, Rosa Foetida would head towards the right, the same way Touko was going. But, on reflection, since Rosa Foetida walked home, she didn’t have to board one of the buses in front of the main gate. She probably had a number of choices when it came to deciding her route home.

“Nope. I thought I should go to the martial arts building before I went home.”

“The martial arts building?”

Well, it was between here and the back gate. The martial arts building was where they practiced various martial arts. And Rosa Foetida was in the Kendo club. But, there probably wouldn’t be anything happening there now.

“I may not have left anything in the Rose Mansion, but my gear is still in the martial arts building. And it’s not really the sort of thing you want to take to a graduation ceremony, so I should get it today.”

Rosa Foetida shrugged, and smiled.

“When my exams were over, I thought I’d be able to lead the younger girls in a lot of practice, but that didn’t really happen.”

That may have been regret on Rosa Foetida’s part. It wasn’t that she had forgotten her gear, she had left it there on purpose.

“Well, all kinds of things happened, and tomorrow’s the graduation ceremony.”

“All kinds of things?”

“You got it. But once you start, there’s no end. So I’m graduating with the feeling that there are still many things left undone.”

It seems everybody had something they wanted Rosa Foetida to do.

“That’s quite noble of you.”

“Huh, isn’t it the opposite?”

Rosa Foetida cackled, but Touko stood by what she said.

To admit that there were still things left undone, and to realize that was okay, was refreshingly noble. Far better than puffing your chest up with pride and declaring that there is nothing left undone.

After going their separate ways, Touko was struck by a thought:

– Rosa Foetida, what on earth have you been doing until now?

Part 2.

“That person – ”

As Noriko was walking or, rather, running, along the path between the classrooms and the library her gaze fell upon a student walking in front of her.

“Rosa Chinensis...?”

Even from a distance, you could identify her based on her graceful carriage, the long, straight, glossy black hair and her proportions. There was no mistaking it, that was Rosa Chinensis.

(Hmmm.)

Noriko hit the brakes, slowing to a walk.

If that was Rosa Chinensis, just what on earth had she been doing until now?

Since there were no classes this afternoon, the students who didn't have activities were allowed to go home. And because Rosa Chinensis hadn't participated in their search for lost items, Noriko had assumed that she would have left by now. Perhaps she had been reluctant to leave her classmates and her classroom.

Or perhaps it was just a look-alike.

Supposing that was Rosa Chinensis on her way home, there would be no logical reason for her to leave the path and continue walking straight ahead. Like Noriko, she would have followed the path as it curved towards the left in order to arrive at the front gate.

It must be someone else after all, then.

Noriko wanted to make sure of this, but then she remembered that she was chasing after Touko, and gave up on the idea. If Touko were to get on the bus before Noriko caught her, it would be a waste of the emotion that Shimako-san had sent her out with.

Noriko followed the path towards the left.

As Noriko picked up speed once more, she couldn't stop wondering who that person had been.

At any rate, that girl had looked just like Rosa Chinensis.

And looking that much like her, she would be a shoe-in for the 'Rosa Chinensis look-alike when seen from behind' contest at the school festival (if there was such a thing).

Perhaps she wasn't on her way home.

Noriko didn't think she had been wearing her school coat. She couldn't remember if that girl had been carrying her bag or not. Similarly, whether she was wearing her indoor or outdoor shoes was fuzzy.

But if she wasn't on her way home, where was she going and what was she going to do?

(If she kept going straight, she'd reach the sports oval. Before that is the gymnasium.)

By now Noriko had completely discarded the 'look-alike' theory, and decided that it must have been Rosa Chinensis.

Arriving at the fork in the road, Noriko again slammed on the brakes and prayed to Maria-sama. Due to the influence of the deeply religious Shimako-san, this was something she had to do even though she was alone and didn't have time to spare. Despite being extremely fond of Buddhist statues, she was flexible on this matter.

(If you think about it.)

As Noriko resumed her run, she was thinking: It doesn't matter whether or not that really was Rosa Chinensis. It's no business of mine whether she's going somewhere unexpected. It's not like this is a game of hide-and-seek. Even so, why is it bugging me so much?

“Ahh.”

That was when she finally realized.

It did matter whether that was her or not. Because if Rosa Chinensis was hiding in some out of the way spot then Yumi-sama wouldn’t be able to find her.

If Touko’s instincts were correct, then Yumi-sama went off hoping to meet Rosa Chinensis. And since it seemed to be a spur of the moment decision, they probably hadn’t arranged to meet each other.

When you’re searching for someone, limiting yourself to that person’s territory is the conventional approach.

Yumi-sama would probably have started by checking Rosa Chinensis’ classroom – that of the third year pine group. Even before that, she may have checked Rosa Chinensis’ shoe box to ascertain whether or not she was still at school.

And if Rosa Chinensis wasn’t in her classroom, but her shoes were in her shoe box, what then? The next step would probably be to check areas where students would be gathering.

Milk hall, the staff room, ... Rosa Chinensis wasn’t a member of any clubs, so Yumi-sama probably wouldn’t check the clubhouse.

– The gymnasium. Actually, since they were setting up for the graduation ceremony there probably would be people there today. And that’s probably where Rosa Chinensis was heading.

(If that’s the case.)

The determined Yumi-sama could probably struggle on to victory. Although it would be a bit difficult for her.

Noriko exited the school gates just in time to see the bus arrive. She hurriedly boarded the bus that looped past M station.

“What happened?”

Touko, who had boarded the bus earlier, asked the panting Noriko that had just appeared.

“Where’s Rosa Gigantea?”

The bus was less crowded now. So Touko had settled down in a double-seat.

“She’s a bit busy.”

“Busy, huh?”

Noriko waited until she had her breath back before she spoke again.

“She told me about the role of the onee-sama.”

Part 3.

The onee-sama embraces and protects – what’s up with that?

Just as she was thinking, ‘Geeze, that sounds like something Youko would say,’ confirmation came that those really were her words. Beaten again.

Caught up as those two were in their conversation, they hadn’t realized that someone was sitting in the seat behind them, straining forwards to listen in.

Well, that’s okay, I guess – Sei thought. It would be bothersome if she was found out. She’d just stay like this until the last stop, inconspicuously listening to their conversation.

Sei hadn’t realized it while she was waiting for the bus to arrive, but it looked like drill-girl had been there.

Nah, it’s not fair to call her drill-girl. She accepted Yumi-chan’s rosary and officially became her petit soeur, so even though she has such a hard to

remember name, she's earned the right to be called by it. What was it, ah, rhat's right, Matsudaira Touko-chan.

Sei had probably been a little bit ahead of Touko-chan in the line. When she got on the bus all the single seats were taken, so she had plopped down in one of the double-seats. That was when the girl with the vertical hair rolls sat down in front of her.

In this day and age you don't often see such wonderful vertical hair rolls as those. It didn't take long to work out it was Touko-chan. Since they were acquaintances, Sei was thinking about saying hello to her and having a bit of fun but then Shimako's petit soeur made an entrance and she decided to watch instead. Noriko-chan seemed to be thinking only of Touko-chan and wasn't paying attention to anything else around her.

Noriko-chan seemed to view Shimako and Yumi-chan as a 'blanket.'

Touko-chan spoke about a great actress stepping down from the stage and a newcomer having to take her role.

Then Noriko-chan asked Touko-chan where she thought students would be congregating currently, and there was a discussion about whether Touko-chan was going to, or went to, the martial arts building. And whether it was manly to grow accustomed to leaving things behind. What's that all about?

Sei found it hard to follow what was being said because she was a few steps removed from the original and had joined in the middle. Nothing she could do about that. Also, they were facing away from her as they talked, so she couldn't catch all they said either. And if you miss a word that's been said when you're eavesdropping, it's not like you can say, 'Huh?' or 'Can you say that again?'

But still, a blanket? That's an eye-opener.

Come to think of it, back when she was a first year, Youko had apparently been likened to a cloth wrapper. Maybe by the time she became a third year called Rosa Chinensis it had evolved into a blanket.

(Youko, huh.)

Remembering what Yoshino-chan had asked her, Sei took out her mobile phone and looked up Youko in her address book.

The subject was ‘Free tomorrow?’

Then she typed in the following for the body: ‘Even if you’re not, add this to your schedule and come. You’ll probably see something interesting.’

With that done, Sei turned back towards the innocent chatter that was happening right in front of her.

The Ribbon's Path

Part 1.

After leaving Katsura-san behind and eventually making her way to the room on the second floor of the Rose Mansion, she was greeted with Yoshino-san asking her, ‘Are you sick?’

“Sick? No.”

As she answered, Yumi made her way over to the chair by the wall and dumped the coat, bag and purse she had been carrying.

“I guess not. But, Yumi-san, when we split up you said ‘I’m just going to the toilet.’”

“Ahh.”

That’s right. After they had finished cleaning, she had gone to the staff room together with Shimako-san and Yoshino-san and they had decided to go back to their classrooms and pick up their belongings, before heading off to the Rose Mansion. Because Shimako-san was in a different class she had split from them at their classroom. But after picking up her belongings Yumi had realized she needed to go to the toilet, so had asked Yoshino-san to go ahead of her. Then after she was done she had run into Katsura-san in the hallway.

“Sorry, sorry.”

It seems they were worried because she had been so late in returning from the toilet.

“Did you take the scenic route back?”

“I bumped into Katsura-san.”

Yumi carried her lunch over to her usual seat at the table. It looked as though Noriko-chan and Touko, who had come to the Rose Mansion straight after cleaning, had already finished their lunch while Shimako-san and Yoshino-san appeared to be about halfway through.

“Katsura-san?”

Shimako-san said.

“I ran into her just before too. I think she said she was going to look for her onee-sama. You must have seen her after that, then.”

It made sense, since Shimako-san and Katsura-san were classmates, they would have more chances to see each other.

“Ahh.”

Just like in a comic book, the light-bulb flicked on inside Yumi’s head.

“You didn’t happen to say something to her like ‘From here I’m going to the Rose Mansion to do some odd jobs,’ did you?”

“Yeah … maybe. Why?”

“So that’s how she knew.”

The true shape of the psychic was revealed. Well, she already knew that Katsura-san’s claim of ESP was mostly fake anyway.

“More importantly, your cute petit soeur was also worried.”

Yoshino-san turned her head prior to speaking. Yumi turned to follow her gaze, and there was her ‘cute petit soeur’ Touko pouring tea at the sink. Yumi didn’t think that Touko would have minded that she was a bit late, but she decided to apologize anyway.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t mention it.”

Touko seemed somewhat lacking in energy when she brought the tea over.

Perhaps this was a result of something Yoshino-san had said to make her worry needlessly. ‘She’s so late, I wonder if she’s okay,’ or ‘Perhaps she’s got a stomach ache.’ Or perhaps Touko herself was feeling sick.

“...”

Especially after what had happened with Katsura-san, Yumi admonished herself that as an onee-sama she should pay more attention to her petit soeur.

The plan was to check the first floor room for anything left behind by Sachiko-sama or Rei-sama, ahead of their graduation tomorrow. But if Touko wasn’t feeling well, it may be better if she went home early instead. She shouldn’t strain herself, and they shouldn’t ask her to.

But Yumi thought that even if she told Touko to go home, Touko wouldn’t leave because everyone else was staying to work. There was a part of her that was very stubborn. In which case it was probably better to finish this quickly.

Yumi launched herself into eating lunch at double speed and while she didn’t quite make her goal of finishing at the same time as Shimako-san and Yoshino-san they didn’t have to wait long for her.

“Well, this shouldn’t take too long.”

Yumi remarked as they were descending the stairs.

“Even so, we have to do this for appearance’s sake.”

Yoshino-san’s lack of interest was obvious as she said this. But it was something they had to do so they were resigned to doing it. Both her tone of voice and her attitude seemed to radiate the feeling that this was a bother.

“Oh, do you think we won’t find anything?”

Shimako-san spoke as though she was expecting something, but even she was allowing for the possibility of finding nothing.

At any rate, they won't have left anything behind and we'll be able to head home quickly – that was the general consensus of the search party members.

Part 2.

So when that item was found there was a general sense of weary exasperation.

The search was winding down when Noriko-chan found a single ribbon in the space between two cardboard boxes.

This discovery was obviously unlike the Rose Mansion stationery, the pens and labels, that had been discovered earlier. But even so, it didn't look like it was something of Sachiko-sama or Rei-sama's either, and the only feeling that it aroused was that it was one half of a matched set.

"Is it yours, onee-sama?"

When Touko asked her this, and Yumi looked at the ribbon, she was immediately sure of it.

(Ummmm...)

The White Rose Family, Shimako-san and Noriko-chan, Yoshino-san and Touko, in other words all the other members of the search party, were waiting for Yumi to answer. This kind of situation may have been amusing, but Yumi had cold sweat running down her back. It felt like an interrogation.

Yumi had recognized it, and already knew that it was hers. But what she couldn't understand was what it was doing here.

Why, is that, here? Why, is that, here? Why, is that, here?

Those words swirled around her head.

The shiny, black velvet ribbons had been her favorite, so she would often wear them on special occasions.

Like for school opening ceremonies and closing ceremonies, or Christmas – .

But currently it was neatly folded in the drawer of her closet at home.

There were no questions about how one of the pair had come to be missing either – Yumi and her onee-sama were both entrusted with the care of one of these precious items.

On Christmas Eve during her first year at high school, when Yumi hadn't brought a present, her onee-sama had asked her for one of the ribbons that she had tied in her hair.

To Yumi, this ribbon was like one of those heart pendants that come in two pieces.

So then, why was it here?

Had the ribbon teleported itself here?

That's just stupid.

Then, did that mean that she had brought it here and left it laying around, but then forgot all about it. In that case, it was a huge problem. She should go to a hospital and have a doctor examine her if she suspected such a defect in her memory.

(So that means –)

“... It’s mine.”

Yumi mumbled.

“What’s up with that pause?”

Naturally, that dig came from Yoshino-san.

“Oh, I didn’t expect to find it again, so I was a bit surprised.”

Because this was the ribbon that Yumi gave to her onee-sama. She didn’t expect to see it again. It had been quite a while. One year and three months, or thereabouts.

“Come to think of it, I haven’t seen you wearing those ribbons lately. I suppose it’s because you lost one of them. But I don’t understand how you’d manage to drop one.”

“Hehehe.”

It was true Yumi didn’t wear these ribbons any more because she only had one of them, but she hadn’t dropped it. She remembered precisely how it had left her possession. But it would be hard to concisely explain that so Yumi chose to laugh it off.

But what was the ribbon that she had given to her onee-sama doing here?

Sachiko-sama had long hair, so she didn’t usually use ribbons. So it was impossible to believe that she had used it to tie her hair, then untied it, carelessly flung it aside and forgotten it.

First things first, how long had that ribbon been here?

Yumi imagined a calendar that went from Christmas Eve of the year before last until today. Like a scroll with the dates flowing from left to right.

The start date was Christmas Eve of the year before last.

Right before the party was about to begin, Sachiko-sama had unfastened the ribbon and put it in her purse. She had said that it would be a disaster if she were to lose it when forced to wear a paper hat in the Rose Mansion.

But Yumi thought the truth was that she was embarrassed. Sachiko-sama wouldn’t have liked it if someone had seen that they were both wearing matching ribbons and teased her about it. So Yumi had also taken her

ribbon off and instead rolled her hair around a ruler and then wreathed it with crepe paper. And then Youko-sama had unexpectedly complimented her, saying ‘Yumi-chan, that looks great.’

In other words, Yumi could safely assume that the ribbon remained inside Sachiko-sama’s purse and made its way to her home.

Then jump forward a bit until this time last year. At the very least, the ribbon hadn’t been found during the equivalent search last year. So she could cross out all the way up to March of last year in the calendar in her mind.

Yumi couldn’t think of any large-scale searches that took place after that, but from time to time they would come down here and they would usually have a cursory look around. And participants in this year’s Valentines Day treasure hunt would probably have had a rummage around too, but nothing was found then. – So that means it wouldn’t have been here before the middle of February.

(A cursory search...)

That’s right, they were just here looking for something the other day. They had decided to make purses as gifts for White Day and were here looking for the sewing machine and iron. Now, the sewing machine and iron are hardly small items, so they didn’t look in every nook and cranny but they probably would have shifted the cardboard boxes. So if the ribbon had been here back then, they probably would have found it.

(Which means.)

The conclusion Yumi reached was that the ribbon wasn’t here back then. At which point, realization started to dawn on her.

Why was the ribbon here? If we rule out the ribbon teleporting here by itself then the only reasonable explanation was that Sachiko-sama had hidden it here.

(But, for what purpose?)

About a week ago, on the second floor of the Rose Mansion, Sachiko-sama had laughed like some olden days noble from a comic book and said:

“Well, there’s no way we would have forgotten any of our personal belongings.”

You wouldn’t expect that someone who would make such a proclamation would purposefully hide something of theirs. Or perhaps it was meant as a challenge – if they couldn’t find the ribbon then just what kind of search had they done?

(No, it’s not that.)

Yumi’s intuition told her.

This wasn’t something that her onee-sama had forgotten.

The black ribbon that Yumi previously wore. The other people here didn’t know that this was something that Yumi had given to Sachiko-sama. So to everyone else, this was just something that Yumi had dropped.

Her onee-sama had left a message that only Yumi would be able to understand.

That was it. There was absolutely no mistaking it.

“Well,”

Yumi turned to Shimako-san and Yoshino-san and addressed them.

“I think we’re finished with the search, don’t you?”

“Yeah.”

Shimako-san agreed.

“Then, I suppose we’re done for today.”

Yoshino-san and Shimako-san both looked at Yumi for a moment. They were probably thinking that Yumi had something to do, since she had suddenly brought up the topic of leaving. But they didn't take it upon themselves to press her for information. After giving a slight nod, they cheerfully responded.

“Looks that way. Don’t worry about tomorrow.”

“Right, right. We’ve already done enough preparation and practice.”

Shimako-san and Yoshino-san probably didn’t have any idea what Yumi was planning on doing after leaving. But they were aware that her thoughts had turned to matters outside the Rose Mansion, so had given her a pleasant farewell. Just what you would expect from close friends.

Sorry.

Since they were both probably expecting that there would be a final meeting about tomorrow after the search was over.

“Thank-you.”

At any rate, Yumi graciously accepted their generosity. As she turned to leave, Touko caught her eye.

“Touko, you can go home ahead of me.”

Those were Yumi’s parting words as she left the room. She was still a little bit concerned about Touko, but Shimako-san and Yoshino-san and Noriko-chan were still there with her.

She’d be fine. If anything happened, they would take care of her.

Part 3.

She had left the Rose Mansion in a hurry, but Yumi didn’t know where to go.

Her only thought was, ‘Onee-sama is calling to me.’

Yumi grasped tightly the ribbon that she held in her hand for the first time in a year and a half.

To everyone else this wasn’t Rosa Chinensis’ lost item. So there was no need to have a ceremony to return it either today or tomorrow.

But Yumi alone knew who the owner of this ribbon was. So it was up to her to deliver it.

Onee-sama is waiting for this.

But where could she be right now?

(Thinking logically, she’d be in her classroom.)

But before that, Yumi went to check her onee-sama’s shoe box. If her indoor shoes were in there, then there was a high probability that Sachiko-sama had already gone home and Yumi would have no option but to abandon the search.

(I knew it.)

Just as she had expected, inside the small locker with the ‘Ogasawara’ name-tag was a neatly placed pair of black outdoor shoes.

Her onee-sama was still at school. There was no doubt about it (because it was impossible that she would have absentmindedly gone home wearing her indoor shoes).

Leaving this area, Yumi headed towards the third year classrooms.

If, like a little while ago, her onee-sama was being besieged by autograph seekers, Yumi decided that she would wait openly until they were finished rather than hiding.

But there was no such scene.

Quite some time had passed since then. There were no longer any younger girls looking for autographs. Perhaps they all thought that Rosa Chinensis had left some time ago.

“Excuse me.”

When Yumi opened the door to the third year pine class, she saw there were still a fair number of people inside.

“Oh, it’s Fukuzawa Yumi-chan.”

“It is too. Rosa Chinensis en bouton.”

Come in, come in, they beckoned her over so Yumi strode confidently inside.

There were about ten people there all up, and they had joined their desks as though they were having lunch together. It seemed as though they were having some kind of party. A farewell ceremony, most likely.

“But Sachiko-san isn’t here.”

“... It looks that way.”

It didn’t take long to check the ten faces.

But there was a huge difference between these people and last year, when Sei-sama had been alone in the classroom at dusk. They seemed to be having a lot of fun, with their rows of sweets and drinks.

“Do you know where she went?”

The kind girls of the third year pine class gathered together their eyewitness accounts to give to Yumi.

“I saw her about an hour ago together with Rei-san from chrysanthemum class in Milk Hall.”

“Hmm.”

That report seemed to be a little too out of date. Yumi had seen her less than an hour ago signing autographs in the hallway. Thinking back on it, Rei-sama had been close by then too. They were probably on their way back from Milk Hall.

“Oh, I didn’t see Rei-san, but I saw Sachiko-san walking down the hallway with Minako-san from the newspaper club.”

“Minako-sama?”

That was the first Yumi had heard of that. So she dug a bit deeper.

“Do you know where they were going?”

“Let’s see....? Actually, they were heading in that direction, so they were probably going to the newspaper club’s clubroom. Because Minako-san was with her.”

The clubhouse was definitely in the general direction she was pointing.

But going with Minako-san to the newspaper club’s clubroom? Why on earth would her onee-sama go there?

“A little while ago I saw Rei-san on my way to the toilet, so they may have split up by then.”

“I guess so.”

At that point, the reports dried up. It was only natural – they had been having their party together in the classroom for most of the afternoon.

“How about the Rose Mansion?”

“I just came from there.”

“I see.”

As Yumi was thinking that she should search somewhere else, one of the chocolate snacks was put in her mouth.

“Well, Sachiko-san’s bag is still here, so she’ll have to come back to get it.”

“Oh wis that sho.”

Leaving her bag in the classroom made it seem as though she had just momentarily stepped out. At the very least, it was further proof that she hadn’t just gone home in her indoor shoes. On top of that, the candy was delicious.

“So why don’t you stay here and wait for her?”

“Hmm.”

Yumi understood the rationale, and was grateful for the offer, but was feeling impatient so she couldn’t just accept their invitation and wait.

“Thanks for the chocolate.”

After bowing quickly, Yumi left the third year pine group classroom. If Sachiko-sama came back, she could rely on them to inform her that Yumi had been here.

Part 4.

She was at school. But she wasn’t in her classroom.

So where could her onee-sama possibly be right now?

Yumi went to check her own classroom, that of the second year pine group. She didn’t expect to see Sachiko-sama there, but the thought had passed her mind that perhaps her onee-sama had gone there to meet her.

Inside the classroom there was a girl’s solitary figure. She seemed to be staring out the window from her seat, but upon noticing the sound of the door opening she waved lazily at Yumi.

“Oh, it’s Yumi-san.”

“Hey Tsutako-san.”

‘What are you doing here now?’ was written on both of their faces.

“I was in the clubroom until just a while ago, but I was thinking about all kinds of things and got a bit sentimental … So I decided to move.”

Tsutako-san laughed softly after saying this.

“Don’t read too much into it. I think it was probably because of the graduation group photograph that I took.”

“Uh-huh.”

Tsutako-san didn’t have an onee-sama, but she was probably fairly close with some of the seniors from the photography club. Well, actually, in Tsutako-san’s case it was probably a different type of closeness. After all, everyone knows about ‘sibling rivalry,’ and it’s probably quite sad for Tsutako-san to see her rivals leave.

“How about you, Yumi-san?”

“I’m looking for my onee-sama.”

“For Sachiko-sama? What is this, hide and seek?”

“I’m not sure if she’s hiding on purpose or not.”

“That’s quite a predicament.”

Tsutako-san had only been in the classroom for about ten minutes, but she said that during that time she hadn’t seen Sachiko-sama. Yumi wasn’t too disappointed, since she had come to her classroom primarily to confirm that Sachiko-sama wasn’t here. It looked like she’d have to try somewhere else.

“Oh, right. We’re counting on you for tomorrow.”

Since she was here, Yumi took the opportunity to remind Tsutako-san about tomorrow.

After the graduation ceremony, Yumi and company had decided to have some photos taken privately. Just like last year, Tsutako-san had been nominated for the role of photographer.

“Ahh, yeah. I’m looking forward to it too.”

Tsutako-san made the ‘OK’ gesture, so it looked like she had everything under control.

“That reminds me, have you checked the clubhouse?”

As Yumi was making her way towards the door, Tsutako-san called out to her.

“The clubhouse? No, not yet.”

When Yumi turned around to ask her why, Tsutako-san added a disclaimer, saying:

“It might be nothing, but I ran into Rosa Foetida in front of the newspaper club’s clubroom.”

“Rei-sama?”

“Yeah. She was with Mami-san.”

Rei-sama and Mami-san? That’s quite an unusual pairing.

“It wasn’t Sachiko-sama and Minako-sama?”

“What? No. Wrong on both accounts.”

But in both cases it was a Rose with a newspaper club member.

“Ahh, but about that.”

Tsutako-san lowered her voice.

“What?”

“I only met Rei-sama, but Sachiko-sama may have come along afterwards. Let’s just say it’s a definite possibility.”

It looked like a fair amount of time had passed since Tsutako-san met Rei-sama. It seemed dubious whether anyone would still be at the newspaper clubroom.

The third year student from the pine class who said she saw Rei-sama when she went to the toilet seemed to backup Yumi’s thoughts.

Still –

“Thank-you. I’ll go check it out.”

After saying this to Tsutako-san, Yumi left the classroom. She would have to hunt down these unlikely locations one by one.

Part 5.

Looking at the clubhouse building from outside, Yumi saw a light glowing in the room she was heading towards.

Which must have meant that someone was still in there, so Yumi went inside, climbed the staircase and knocked on the door to the newspaper club’s clubroom.

“Coming.”

Almost immediately, Mami-san opened the door. She was one of Yumi’s classmates.

“Ahh, Yumi-san.”

Mami-san said, as though sighing.

“What’s happened?”

Yumi asked the question that was normally reserved for the person being visited. She did this because, for some reason, Mami-san seemed completely exhausted. No, that wasn't quite it. It seemed as though Mami-san was at a complete loss as to what to do.

"Nothing."

Again, it seemed like she was forcing this out with a sigh. As though just remembering, Mami-san asked, 'What brings you here?'

"Minako-sama – is she in?"

Was the question Yumi started out with. From Mami-san's appearance, Yumi could tell that Sachiko-sama wasn't inside. But if Minako-sama, who had been with Sachiko-sama, was there, Yumi could ask her what time Sachiko-sama had left and where she was going.

"Well, she is but she's a bit distracted at the moment so I don't know if she'll be much use to you."

Mami-san said this and looked back into the clubroom, at which point the voice of Minako-sama came from within.

"Yumi-san? Is that Yumi-san?"

"Ah, yeah."

Yumi responded, since she was undoubtedly 'Yumi-san.' The 'distracted' Minako-sama walked unsteadily over to the door and, upon confirming that it was Yumi-san, hugged her tightly.

"Umm, ah, what?"

Yumi was flustered by the unexpected contact and had no idea what brought this on when Minako-sama spoke.

"Thank-you. Yumi-san."

"Huh?"

“It’s all thanks to you. So wonderful.”

“Wait, wait a minute, Minako-sama.”

Yumi still had no idea what was going on. At any rate, to be embraced like this by Minako-sama in front of her petit soeur, Mami-san, was distasteful (although it would probably be a bigger problem if they were doing it somewhere where Mami-san wouldn’t see). But no matter how she squirmed, Yumi couldn’t get free. Today Minako-sama seemed to possess super-human strength that would be more at home in the athletics clubroom.

“I’m begging you – please let me go.”

As she was standing there embarrassed, Mami-san calmly tapped her on the shoulder.

“Thank-you.”

“Huh?”

Yumi still had no idea what the pair of soeurs were talking about. Thankfully, Mami-san explained it properly.

“Firstly, thanks for bringing such happiness to my onee-sama. Secondly, thanks for bringing her back out of her daze.”

After saying that, Mami-san calmly but firmly removed Minako-sama’s hands from Yumi. Thanks to that, Yumi’s body was freed – although Minako-sama didn’t look the least bit remorseful.

“At any, rate thank-you.”

Minako-sama said this and then happily returned inside the clubroom. Mami-san smiled as she followed her onee-sama’s movements with her eyes.

“A while ago Rosa Chinensis and Rosa Foetida were here, having a chat with my onee-sama. This made her extremely happy.”

“Hold up. I had nothing to do with that.”

That was Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama’s good deed. There was no need to go as far as thanking their petit soeur.

“I guess so. But my onee-sama seems to think that it’s all thanks to you, Yumi-san, so I guess it’s okay.”

So it would seem. Still, something didn’t quite make sense about it.

“More importantly, that means that my onee-sama was here, right?”

“Yeah. But she left together with Rosa Foetida. That was a fair while ago.”

“Do you know where she was going afterwards?”

“Sorry, I didn’t ask.”

“I guess not.”

Well, at least Yumi knew that Sachiko-sama wasn’t still in the newspaper club’s clubroom.

“Yumi-san, are you looking for Rosa Chinensis.”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

Yumi said as she pushed on the door that was slightly ajar.

Well then, where should she look next?

Part 6.

Yumi felt like she was chasing the footsteps of her onee-sama.

Once Sachiko-sama had been seen in a certain place she didn’t go back, no matter how much time had passed. Like a criminal avoiding the scene of the crime.

But when Yumi went to Milk Hall it was already shut and there was no-one inside.

Well, that happens too. Yumi cleared her head, pulled herself together and thought about where to go next.

No-one had said anything about Sachiko-sama going there, but since Yumi had come this far she decided to stray from the path and walk over to the old greenhouse.

Yumi noticed that the air temperature was slightly warmer than outside as soon as she stepped inside. Because the weather had been nice today, the sun's rays had probably warmed the interior of the greenhouse. It felt like it was May inside.

Yumi didn't know who it was, but somebody took good care of the plants, which gave the space a relaxing atmosphere. There was no sign of anybody in there. The 'pixie' that looked after this place had probably gone home by now too.

Yumi walked slowly, then stopped when she reached her destination – the place where the 'Rosa Chinensis' shrub was planted.

During her first year of high school, on the day before the school festival, Yumi had followed after Sachiko-sama as she ran away in tears and eventually caught up to her here. That was the first time Yumi had been inside.

(Back then.)

Thinking back, Yumi smiled fondly. It must have been a terrible experience for the ginkgo prince, Kashiwagi-san, first being slapped and then being pushed over onto the ginkgo nuts. And that terrible experience had been caused by Sachiko-sama and Yumi. But after so much time it was just a funny story. It felt like they had come a long way since that day.

(That's right.)

Back then, Sachiko-sama had been sitting on one of the ledges inside the greenhouse. Yumi had shifted a potted plant from beside her, and sat herself down.

(Right about here.)

Turning around, the ledge from that day was still there. Sachiko-sama wasn't there, but there was still a space for two people to sit beside each other.

Feeling nostalgic, Yumi moved closer to the ledge. That day, as they sat next to each other, was the first time she felt as though their souls had connected.

“Oh...?”

Looking closer, Yumi saw traces of something that looked like a circular stain on top of the ledge. There was a section about 15cm in diameter that looked darker than its surroundings, as though it had been wet. It was right in the center of where they had sat on that day.

The mark seemed familiar. Yumi saw a similar stain when she lifted a potted plant on the next ledge over, although the size was different. Which meant that a flower pot had been placed there recently. And not just an empty flower pot, one that had soil and a plant growing in it since it had been watered thoroughly, so that the water reached the roots.

“Wah.”

Yumi cried out instinctively when a pill-bug suddenly appeared and crawled up the side of the flower pot. It was probably equally surprising to the pill-bug. ‘I’m sorry,’ Yumi mumbled as she put the pot back in its original position.

(At any rate.)

Yumi looked around restlessly. Where was the flower pot that had been there earlier?

She quickly found what she was looking for. The flower pot that had previously been on the ledge was on the floor about 50cm away from her feet. The base of the pot matched the size of the stain on the ledge.

The plant contained in the pot had leaves that looked like those of a pine tree. It didn't seem to be a bonsai, since it was in a standard ceramic pot and there didn't seem to be much done by way of pruning. Instead the plant had been allowed to grow freely to a height of about 30cm. Stuck in the soil was a plastic tag that read 'Japanese white pine,' so it looked like it was a relative of the pine tree.

It was a bit heavy and Yumi strained to lift the plant and place it on top of the mark. Taking a step back and looking at it, both the visual impression and the impression on the ledge were a perfect match.

Yumi was convinced that the plant had been on that ledge until about an hour ago. No, it probably would have dried in under thirty minutes.

Who had moved this plant, and for what reason?

"Onee-sama...?"

Yumi looked at the potted plant. This wasn't the Rosa Chinensis shrub, but it was definitely whispering to her:

Sachiko-sama was here, Sachiko-sama was here.

"Thank-you. And sorry for moving you so many times."

Having returned the plant to its original position, Yumi left the greenhouse.

Part 7.

Sachiko-sama and Rei-sama had split up after leaving the clubhouse.

They may have started heading back towards the classroom together but at some point Sachiko-sama had said something like, 'I have things to take

care of,' and made her way to the old greenhouse alone.

How long Sachiko-sama had stayed in the greenhouse was unknown but it seemed as though she had borrowed the Japanese white pine's seat and daydreamed. Perhaps, like Yumi, she had been thinking back to that day.

It didn't seem as though Sachiko-sama had any particular tasks she wanted to do in the old greenhouse. If forced to give it a name, just 'coming to the greenhouse' itself was probably it.

Yumi made a guess. Sachiko-sama was probably following the path of her memories.

A year ago, Sei-sama had said her goodbyes to her classroom.

And Youko-sama had tried to experience everything she possibly could.

And Eriko-sama had blasted Yoshino-san with every little thing she wanted to tell her, and the classmates were having their party in the classroom, and the seniors in the photography club had a commemorative graduation photograph taken – everyone had their own ceremony that needed to take place for them to be comfortable with graduating.

In that case, where would she be going next?

Yumi started walking. Without a plan. Letting her feet take her wherever her feelings did. It was probably the same method her onee-sama was using. Although she wondered if that was okay.

What would she do if she met her onee-sama?

After all, she probably wanted to be alone. To have Yumi walking with her would probably be a bother.

(Even so.)

Yumi had the ribbon. So she felt like she was being called to. That was why she started looking for Sachiko-sama, and she couldn't let her resolve be broken.

Yumi walked along, looking at the school buildings to the right and the library to the left. Walking along the path that continued to the sports grounds.

But rather than continuing to the sports grounds Yumi took a turn to her right.

The gymnasium seemed kind of lively because the teachers were still there getting things ready for the graduation ceremony. The chairs had been arranged yesterday by the first year students but there were still plenty of things to do. The red and white curtains, the program of events, the national flag and the school flag all had to be put up, as well as numerous other minor tasks.

“A bit to the left, and a bit lower.”

“Oh, isn’t that upside-down?”

“Here’s the documents from last year.”

A small window had been flung open near the stage and Yumi listened to the conversation that came flowing out. It seemed as though there were a number of students mixed in with the teachers. Probably people that had agreed to help in return for meal tickets from the noodle shop.

In direct contrast to the hustle and bustle inside, the back of the gymnasium still had the same serene atmosphere as always.

“I guess she’s not here.”

Since they hadn’t arranged to meet behind the gymnasium today, Yumi wasn’t really expecting Sachiko-sama to be waiting there. Still, Yumi looked down and smiled. In the small gap between the gymnasium and the store-room, there was a section of ground with a thin layer of dust on it. And there was another set of tracks beside Yumi’s brand new ones. Yumi went over to have a look, and placed her foot down next to one of the existing tracks – the shape was almost identical.

Not only that, but when comparing the size of the tracks to her own shoe size, Yumi saw they were exactly the same.

“The culprit’s shoe size is 23cm.”

It was a fairly ordinary shoe size for girls, but amongst the Rose families there was only one person other than Yumi that had such a shoe size – who else but Ogasawara Sachiko-sama.

Having seized on the culprit’s shoe size was proof enough for Yumi. As she was walking back to the front of the gymnasium, Katori-sensei emerged from inside.

“Oh, there’s Rosa Chinensis en bouton too.”

Katori-sensei said upon seeing Yumi. That was a different greeting to the ‘Fukuzawa-san’ she usually used. And what was with that ‘too’ at the end? It was said with quite some emphasis. Yumi had all kinds of questions remaining, but the first thing to do was to acknowledge the greeting.

“Thanks for all your hard work.”

“Not at all. I’m beat. If you’d like, why don’t you help out. There’s cake and soft drinks.”

“Cake?”

That’s not meal tickets from the noodle shop.

“I’m on my way to buy it right now.”

Katori-sensei held up the black purse she had in her hand.

“But it’s only going to be from the convenience store. And because there’s so many people, I’ll probably have to go to a number of stores.”

She seemed enthusiastic about walking out the main gates to the convenience store that was opposite the wall and buying out their entire selection of cakes.

“How extravagant.”

“It’s because we have a sponsor.”

“A sponsor?”

“Atsumi-sensei strained her back, so she wasn’t able to be of much use. If she tried to do too much, she wouldn’t be well enough to come to the graduation ceremony tomorrow. So she gave me her purse and said to make use of it. Ahh, but this is a secret. Don’t tell anyone else.”

Well, it probably wouldn’t be good for a teacher’s reputation if everyone knew that they bought their way out of problems. Still, it was unfortunate for Atsumi-sensei who was suffering from lower back pain, so Yumi thought she could keep this under wraps.

“So, what are you going to do?”

She was probably asking whether or not Yumi would assist them in their work.

“I would just get in the way.”

Yumi politely refused.

“You soeurs are so cold. That’s exactly how Rosa Chinensis refused.”

“I’m humbled.”

Yumi finally understood why she had been addressed as ‘Rosa Chinensis en bouton,’ and why the ‘too’ had been there in their initial exchange.

“But, sensei. Ignoring me for the moment, my onee-sama has a leading role in tomorrow’s ceremony. Why would you be scouting her to help with the –”

“Ahh, that’s right.”

Katori-sensei clapped her hands together, as though she had just remembered something. Atsumi-sensei's purse got in the way, but she still produced a decent sound.

"I still feel like it wasn't all that long ago that Ogasawara-san entered into high school."

In other words, what Katori-sensei was saying was that as you get older, the years seem to go by even quicker. Since that was how Yumi was feeling now, it made her dizzy to think what it would be like when she reached Katori-sensei's age.

"It's a lonely thought, isn't it."

"Yeah."

Although Yumi agreed, she didn't feel as though she was completely alone.

Part 8.

Yumi split from Katori-sensei in front of the entrance.

"Oh."

Unexpectedly, the Fukuzawa Yumi character didn't make her way back to the school buildings, instead taking a large detour towards the path lined with ginkgo trees. Just before the path forks there's a small courtyard that contains the statue of Maria-sama. That must have been what she was aiming for.

(Of course.)

If she was retracing her memories, there was no way this place would be left out.

This was the place where Sachiko-sama first called out to Yumi.

The place where, on the night of the school festival, Sachiko-sama placed her rosary around Yumi's neck.

The place where, under Sachiko-sama's supervision, Yumi and Touko had become soeurs.

(Oops.)

The Fukuzawa Yumi character stopped abruptly. She was still a fair distance from her goal, but what she saw ahead of her made her give up on the idea.

There were already visitors in front of the statue of Maria-sama.

The figures of two people.

At first Yumi thought they were students on their way home who had stopped to pray at the statue. In that case, it would have been okay to wait a little while until they were finished – but she soon saw that wasn't quite the case.

The two of them weren't standing next to each other praying towards the statue of Maria-sama, instead they were facing each other. And one of them had their hand in their pocket and was slowly drawing something out –

Yumi was too far away to see what exactly was being brought forth from the girl's pocket, but it was clear what was going to happen next.

Right now, a rosary was about to be transferred and a new pair of soeurs would be born.

Knowing that, it would be vulgar of her to wait until they were finished. In her mind Yumi whispered, 'Please, take your time,' and turned around and left.

Good luck, new soeurs.

All kinds of things will happen from now on, but don't give up.

There will be times when you cry, times when you'll be angry and times when you won't hear what the other's saying, but if you don't let go of each other's hands eventually you'll understand each other.

If someone asks you 'Do you like your onee-sama?' or 'Do you like your petit soeur?' and you can unhesitatingly answer yes then you'll be fine, and your partner will feel the same.

Such were the thoughts of the Fukuzawa character, who had a fair bit of experience as a soeur.

Part 9.

After cleaning the dirt from her indoor shoes, Yumi entered the school building.

Thinking that her onee-sama may have returned, Yumi was making her way towards the third year pine group classroom when she saw Yoshino-san in front of the office.

To be precise, Yoshino-san was standing in front of the yellow-green public phone that was out front of the office, with her back towards Yumi. – In short, it looked like she was making a phone call.

As Yumi was thinking she should probably just pass by without waiting for her, Yoshino-san put the receiver back on the hook.

Yoshino-san let out a sigh as she turned around, and then when she saw Yumi:

"Auuugh!"

Yoshino-san cried out in shock.

Which caused Yumi to cry out in shock too, although her reaction wasn't quite as large.

“... What was that? You surprised me.”

“That’s supposed to be my line.”

Yoshino-san was wearing her coat and holding her bag, so she was probably on her way home. But it had been quite a while since Yumi had left the Rose Mansion. What had Yoshino-san been up to during that time? Had she been sipping tea and chatting with everyone in the room on the second floor?

“How’s Sachiko-sama? Did you see her?”

“Nope... Wait, how did you know?”

“ESP.”

She was the second person today, after Katsura-san, to claim she had psychic powers.

“Or, more likely, it was written all over my face, right?”

Yumi wasn’t going to be tricked. They had obviously sent her out telling her everything was okay because her feelings were showing clearly.

For a long time now, Yumi’s feelings would always show on her face. She had entered into an apprenticeship to try and control them, but it wasn’t easy.

“Nope. Well, we could see that you had some urgent business you wanted to attend to.”

Yoshino-san laughed, then added, ‘Like I said ESP.’

“By Touko-chan.”

“Touko?”

Touko has ESP? What’s that all about?

“Yep. Touko-chan said that your business probably related to Sachiko-sama. And it looks like she was right.”

“Really.”

Touko had known. Yumi wasn’t surprised. Hmm. She had an excellent handle on things.

“But I don’t really think it was ESP, just a normal petit soeur.”

Even so, what Yoshino-san had said was something wonderful.

“So has Touko gone home?”

“Probably. But, sorry. I left before her, so I can’t say for certain.”

“It’s okay, I was just asking.”

As Yumi shook her head, she was wondering, ‘In that case, what has Yoshino-san been doing?’ She had no idea whatsoever.

“I’m about to head over to the middle school.”

“Huh, oh, is that so?”

It would be inelegant to ask her what she was going to do. Yoshino-san was going to see Arima Nana-chan. You could tell that without having to be a psychic.

“Take care.”

Yoshino-san looked as though she was about to step onto a battlefield so Yumi didn’t pry and bid her farewell. At that time, Yumi felt as though her feelings mirrored those of her good friends when they had sent her out from the Rose Mansion.

Part 10.

When she arrived at the third year pine group classroom, Yumi started to panic.

The lights inside the classroom were turned off.

She could tell that from where she stood in the hallway.

It was after 3:30pm and the sun was starting to sink rapidly. The lights from the neighboring classroom were dazzling.

Yumi had a bad premonition that the party had already finished. Even so, she couldn't just stand there at the boundary. She balled her hand into a fist ready to knock on the door and proceeded towards it.

That was when a voice called out to her, asking, 'What's your business here?' When Yumi turned around, there was a third year standing there – probably from this class.

"Oh, Fukuzawa Yumi-chan."

She gave the impression that Yumi should wait a bit, then went into the classroom. There was no sign of the people who had been having a party in there.

"It looks like Sachiko-san has been back here. Her bag's gone."

The girl reported after quickly returning. It seems she had been over to check Sachiko-sama's desk.

Her bad premonition had been spot on.

Peeking inside the classroom from the doorway, there was no-one in there except the girl who had just entered. The tables that had formed the one big table were all neatly lined up in their original positions, as though nothing had happened. She had a look at the blackboard, to see if a message had been left there, but there was nothing whatsoever written on it.

"As you can see, I just got back here myself, so I don't know when Sachiko-san was last here."

The girl apologetically reported to Yumi, who remained standing there, letting her gaze drift around inside the classroom.

“That’s okay. Thank-you all the same.”

After bowing, Yumi walked off down the hallway.

There was no reason to believe that the girls having their party would remain here until Sachiko-sama returned solely to deliver the message that Yumi wanted to meet her. First of all, it was such an imposition that Yumi had never even considered asking it of them.

So there was no doubting that conclusion.

If there was a reason Yumi had been beaten, it was because of an error in her judgment.

Instead of listening to their advice, Yumi had gone looking for Sachiko-sama outside. After failing to find Sachiko-sama in the clubhouse and at Milk Hall she should have returned here. Instead, she kept on going – to the old greenhouse, then the gymnasium and even to the statue of Maria-sama.

There was no reason to believe the party would continue forever.

If only she had realized that.

(Let’s go home.)

But first, she’d have to go to the Rose Mansion and get her belongings. Then she could go home.

Right.

If she hurried, there was a chance Yumi might still be able to meet Sachiko-sama at the bus stop.

Holding on to that slim hope, Yumi broke into a jog. She could rest when she got there.

When she left the Rose Mansion, Yumi had no idea she would be returning under such circumstances. Although she didn't have any basis for it, she had believed that she would be able to meet Sachiko-sama.

Human intuition isn't so great a thing.

As she opened the front door to the Rose Mansion, Yumi gave a thin smile.

Yumi looked back over her shoulder, reminiscing. Speaking of places from her memories, this place was definitely one of those.

In the autumn of her first year, at Tsutako-san's instigation, she had come here to meet Sachiko-sama. As she stood outside, working up the courage to enter, her classmate Shimako-san had called out to her and invited her in.

The squeaking sounds of the wooden staircase, the glowing stained glass window – everything had seemed new and unusual to Yumi's eyes.

After climbing the staircase and turning to the right, at the start of the hallway was the biscuit-like door. When she had followed Shimako-san to this doorway, the sound of someone shouting could be heard from inside.

(This is tyranny! The onee-sama are being mean!)

Yumi was thoroughly surprised when she learned that it was Sachiko-sama's voice. What was even more surprising was –

Yumi placed her hand on the doorknob and gently turned, before pulling the door towards her.

And then.

“Ahh!”

At the same time as the shout, something came flying out of the room with considerable force.

Later, when she had calmed down and thought about it, Yumi realized there had been many hints – before she opened the door there had been noises

coming from the other side, when she turned the doorknob it turned a bit easier than normal and the moment the door opened there was light coming from the other side. But it all happened in an instant, so at the time she wasn't able to put all this information together.

“Auuugh!”

Yumi realized the ‘something’ that came flying out was a person when she felt the impact across her whole body. Then her field of vision tilted, the ceiling spun around and soon afterwards she felt the pain coming from her buttocks.

If she was just replaying her memory, would there be pain?

Suffering exactly the same misfortune as on that day, Yumi’s power of reasoning had once again taken flight.

The soft, gentle pressure that ran from her chest to her abdomen, the long hair that belonged to someone else covering her face – in every detail it was an exact replica of what had happened before.

It was like a scene from a movie, where the main character had slipped backwards in time. And because of that they were able to meet the person they wanted to see, to fix some incident they regretted or to deliver some message, or, occasionally, to accomplish some great task to change the course of history.

So if she were to get up now, would she be in the world of a year and a half ago?

(Are you alright?)

Shimako-san and Tsutako-san would be beside her, watching on with concern. Having noticed the commotion, the Roses would come filing out from inside the room.

(Aww. That was a flashy fall.)

(Eh, she got crushed by Sachiko’s 50kg? How miserable-!)

(Heeey. Victim, are you alive?)

Rei-sama would be there, as would Yoshino-san, hidden behind her.

Such a nostalgic scene. Nostalgic –

“Yumi, are you alright!?”

Being gently shaken awake, Yumi opened her eyes and there, as expected, was Sachiko-sama.

“Ahh, stop. If you hit your head, you shouldn’t move. That’s what Rei said.”

“Ahh, it’s alright. I only fell on my butt.”

When she hastily stood up and looked around, Yumi couldn’t see Rei-sama standing there, nor anyone else.

“Are you sure you’re alright?”

“Yeah.”

When Yumi nodded, Sachiko-sama’s anxious face loosened and she returned to her usual calm demeanor.

“I’m so glad.”

Once Sachiko-sama realized Yumi wasn’t hurt, she quickly went back into the room. Yumi smiled wryly as she followed her onee-sama.

It looked like she hadn’t slipped back in time, after all.

“Onee-sama, what are you doing here?”

On top of the table was a cup that was about half filled with tea, and a paperback novel with a bookmark in it. They were located in front of the only seat that was flung back, disrupting the orderly arrangement of all the other chairs.

“Isn’t this where I usually come to meet you?”

“Huh?”

“Am I mistaken? My classmates told me that you had come to the classroom asking about me.”

Sachiko-sama placed her hands on the back of the chair, and returned it to its position at the table.

“...You’re not mistaken.”

So that meant that Sachiko-sama had returned to her classroom before the party had finished, and heard Yumi’s message. Then she had come to the Rose Mansion, seen Yumi’s bag was there, poured herself a cup of tea and read her book while she waited.

“Just what have you been doing until this hour?”

Her tone of voice also indicated that she was saying, ‘You’ve kept your onee-sama waiting,’ so there was no way Yumi could say, ‘I’ve been looking for you.’

“Taking a stroll, I guess.”

Yumi answered, in desperation. Of course, as part of her search for her onee-sama she had walked to all kinds of places so it wasn’t a total lie.

All Sachiko-sama did was curtly mutter, ‘Is that so.’ She didn’t interrogate Yumi as to where she had walked to.

“That’s right. Here.”

Yumi remembered what she had been doing, and took the black ribbon from her pocket.

“Ahh. I see you did a thorough job on the search.”

Sachiko-sama laughed as she said this, so it looked as though she had intentionally hidden it, after all.

“I thought you didn’t want it, and were returning it to me, onee-sama.”

“My, what harsh words you sting me with. If you truly believed that, you wouldn’t have brought it to me, right?”

And with that, Sachiko-sama plucked the black ribbon from Yumi’s hand as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

“Now even this becomes something that we’ve done twice, not just once.”

Sachiko-sama turned to look at the biscuit door as she spoke. It seemed she too had remembered perfectly the similar accident that happened a year and a half ago. However.

“But, really, I’d grown tired of waiting for you to come back, so when I finally heard someone climbing up the stairs I went over to the door to have a look and see who it was. But when I put my hand on the doorknob to open it, someone flung it open from the other side.”

Sachiko-sama made it sound as though she was the victim in all this trouble.

However.

Hating to lose, the queen bee, hysterical, self-centered, willful, charming, gentle, emotionally profound, beautiful – Yumi could keep listing these traits endlessly, but she loved these things about her onee-sama.

“Really, you’re like a child, never calm – ”

After saying this, Sachiko-sama broke into a wry smile and shook her head, as though just realizing something.

“No. This time I’m the one that can’t calm down.”

Yumi started to say, ‘Exactly so,’ but she couldn’t. It seemed as though she would burst into tears if she were to say such an impudent thing.

“Yumi?”

“Even though we’re in the same place as back then.”

Really, the two of them had come a long way.

See, told you so. The dam holding back Yumi’s tears had burst. But she didn’t understand why the tears flowed.

“That’s right.”

Sachiko-sama said as she stroked Yumi’s cheeks.

“Do you want to return to that time, Yumi?”

“Huh?”

At first Yumi didn’t understand what she was asking. Do you want to return to that time? But there’s no way to return.

“As for me.”

After briefly looking up at the ceiling, Sachiko-sama continued.

“I hold it dear, but I don’t want to return to it. The year and a half that has passed since then has been just fine. All kinds of things happened, but because of those days and months I can hold hands with you as you are now, Yumi. If God granted me a year and a half to use as I liked, then I wouldn’t hesitate to use it for the future, don’t you agree?”

Yumi was thinking, ‘Ahh, right. You’re exactly correct.’

“I think you’re great as you are now too, onee-sama.”

If they were to return to that time, all the days that had piled up since then would seem like a dream. Yumi didn’t want that. She didn’t want to lose the

onee-sama that was before her eyes, now, in this place.

Then Sachiko-sama looked breathtakingly beautiful as she smiled and said:

“I have a confession to make.”

“Okay?”

“I’m sure you’ve already figured this out, but I hid the ribbon because I wanted to see you again, just the two of us. I knew you’d agree if I came straight out and said it, but I couldn’t find a pretext to use to summon you.”

“Pretext...”

“I don’t really know myself. Why did I want to see you? Because we’re soeurs, if I wanted to see you all I would have to do is say so. Isn’t it strange? Why did I feel like there was a reason for wanting to see you?”

Sachiko-sama’s remarks hit home with Yumi.

That was because Yumi herself hadn’t fully understood why, but when she saw the ribbon she thought that she absolutely had to meet with her onee-sama.

It wasn’t just that they wanted to see each other. They both felt that when they met, there was something that they should do.

“I get it, now.”

Sachiko-sama straightened the ribbon horizontally and held it up to her eye level.

“It’s like when you have to censor photos of certain people.”

Yumi laughed unthinkingly when the black line reached Sachiko-sama’s eye level.

“It really is.”

The corners of Sachiko-sama's lips raised.

"Enough joking around."

Yumi took Sachiko-sama's hands in her own and lowered the ribbon. At the same time that Sachiko-sama's eyes reappeared, large teardrops started to spill from them.

"O...Onee-sama."

Flustered by such an unexpected occurrence, Yumi let her palms slip from the back of Sachiko-sama's hands. Yumi didn't quite know what happened, but her right hand got tangled up in the ribbon and it ended up looking as though her right hand and her onee-sama's left hand were bound together in handcuffs.

"I wanted to see you, Yumi. And I know that you came because you wanted to see me too."

Despite Sachiko-sama's right hand not being bound in the ribbon, she didn't use it to wipe away her own tears.

"I'm not going to cry at tomorrow's graduation ceremony."

Onee-sama cried as she said this.

"Yes."

Yumi agreed. Her own left hand was free, but she didn't even think about bringing it up to her own cheek either.

That left hand wasn't there so that she could wipe away her own tears.

It existed so that she could tightly embrace someone precious to her.

"So all the tears that I would have shed tomorrow, I want to cry today, in front of you, Yumi."

With their free hands, they pulled each other closer together.

The black ribbon remained tied around their wrists.

Where they touched, Yumi could feel her onnee-sama's warmth.

Their tears mixed together and soaked their uniforms and the floor.

Yumi too, understood now.

Embracing each other and crying like this was the ceremony that they both needed.